

What is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*? Transnationality and Mexico's *Mestizaje* System in and around Silvia Moreno-Garcia's Novels

by Luisa Fernanda Grijalva-Maza and Claude Denis

Abstract: *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) seems to embrace a transgressive role for the traditional Gothic heroine and for Southern *mestizaje*, countering colonialist forces, patriarchal subjectivities and a dominant morality. We argue instead that SMG's perspective is not quite so inclusive and critical, and less anticolonialist than meets the eye. It is rather anchored in white feminism, and reproduces Mexico's *mestizaje system* that promotes a whitening of the "race." *Mexican Gothic* in particular tells a story of conflict between colonizers and colonized, but makes it a binary conflict of evil Europeans against valiant *mestiza* Mexicans, erasing the women of the First Peoples and of whole classes of non-whitened Mexicans. To understand this tension, we ask what is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*. We begin with a discussion of the dominant narratives of Mexican identity, centred on whitening and *mestizaje*. Then, we look at how female characters are written in *Mexican Gothic* and five other novels. We outline the novel's transnational conditions of production and reception, between Mexico (the author's country of birth), Canada (where she lives) and the United States (where she publishes).

Keywords: *Mexican Gothic*; *Mestizaje* system; decolonial feminisms; Gothic Studies; sociology of literature; transnationality; coloniality and gender

Résumé : Le roman *Mexican Gothic* (2020) de Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) semble donner un rôle transgressif à l'héroïne Gothique traditionnelle et au mestizaje du Sud, rejetant tant les forces colonialistes que les subjectivités patriarcales et la moralité dominante. Nous croyons au contraire que la perspective de SMG n'est pas aussi inclusive et critique, et moins anticolonialiste, qu'elle ne donne à voir. Elle est plutôt ancrée dans le féminisme blanc, et reproduit le système de mestizaje mexicain qui encourage le blanchiment de la «race». En particulier, *Mexican Gothic* raconte une histoire de conflit entre colonisateurs et colonisé-e-s, mais en fait un conflit binaire entre méchants Européens et courageuses mestizas mexicaines, ce qui efface les femmes des Premiers Peuples ainsi que des classes entières de Mexicain-e-s non «blanchis». Pour comprendre cette tension, nous posons la question de ce qu'il y a de mexicain dans *Mexican Gothic*. Nous commençons par une discussion des principaux narratifs de l'identité mexicaine, centrés sur le blanchiment et le mestizaje. Nous examinons ensuite les personnages féminins, et la façon dont ils sont écrits, dans *Mexican Gothic* et cinq autres romans. Nous esquissons les conditions transnationales de production et de réception du roman, du Mexique (pays de naissance de l'autrice) au Canada (pays où elle vit) et aux États-Unis (là où elle publie).

Mots clés : *Mexican Gothic*; système du mestizaje; féminismes décoloniaux; Études Gothiques; sociologie de la littérature; transnationalité; colonialité et genre

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Introduction

The novelist Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) has described herself as “Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination” (Moreno-Garcia 2026). This phrase appears in the “extended biography” on her own website’s “About” page, and it is repeated in a *Los Angeles Times* interview and review of her work in 2022 (Woods 2022), in the wake of the popular and critical success of her US-published *Mexican Gothic* (2021a). These three coordinates, Mexican, Canadian, and American, anchor the “new” North American frame within which Moreno-Garcia and her works operate, the region consisting of three countries and not just the two northernmost ones. This frame is characterized not only by its neo-liberal trading agreements, but also by the region’s deep-rooted colonialities of power and of gender that shape subjectivities as much as they do economic and power relations.

SMG does not write *about* North America, however. Apart from her 2025 novel, *The Bewitching*, much of which is set in New England, she tells stories set in Mexico, formulating an explicit critique of Mexico’s patriarchal and colonialist features. This has been an important component of their positive critical reception, marking them—and their author—as progressive, anti-colonialist contributors to the empowerment of Southern women (Castillo-Garsow 2024; Cutter 2021). In the context of Gothic literature and studies, such works are seen as transforming the portrayal of women, by turning them from victims to transgressive heroines who challenge colonial relations (Castillo-Garsow 2024). More broadly, SMG’s work has elicited remarkable praise—such as in Paula Woods’s *LA Times* article referenced above:

If you read her work as deeply as it deserves to be read—beyond its page-turning thrills—or if you talk to Moreno-Garcia, as I did via Zoom while she sat in her Vancouver home, you’ll see that what lies beneath is even more astonishing: a perspective on Mexican history as broad and inclusive as any you’re likely to see in fiction—never mind a bestseller list (Woods 2022).

We argue that SMG’s work is not quite so broad and inclusive, and is less anticolonialist than meets the eye. Our analysis proceeds through a close reading of gendered/racialized characterizations in her work, particularly *Mexican Gothic*, and is supported by perspectives from the sociology of literature and her context of reception/production. *Mexican Gothic* tells a story of conflict between colonizers and colonized, but makes it a binary conflict of evil Europeans against valiant *mestiza* Mexicans, erasing First Peoples and whole classes of non-whitened Mexicans. Throughout the Americas since the nineteenth century, new national elites have indeed displaced European colonizers, but they have also marginalized and erased First Peoples. In Mexico, this has been done in part through the promotion of a model of *mestizaje* in which the white / European part is privileged over the Indigenous one. *Mexican Gothic* does the same thing and so elevates whitened *mestizas* over racialized women.

In this article, *Mexican Gothic* is our primary focus but we have also read five other SMG novels set in Mexico—most of her output in the past dozen years—and we bring them to bear when relevant to help identify key vectors in her

writing. There are recurring themes and tropes here, and flagging a few of them across a number of novels shows that their presence in *Mexican Gothic* is not merely incidental. These novels are *Signal to Noise* (Moreno-Garcia 2022), *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2020), *Velvet Was the Night* (2021b), *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* (2022), *Silver Nitrate* (2023). Through this body of work, SMG's writing ambition and the challenge that she faces have been considerable: to enact the struggles of Mexican *mestiza* women, which implies a "translation of the margins to the center" (Olarte-Sierra 2025, 4). This is not only a question of translating words, but of translating for a Northern audience life experiences that are common and readily intelligible in the South. Enacting the struggles of Mexican *mestiza* women, written from Canada for a mostly English speaking, American audience, SMG's novels bear the mark of the in-betweenness of "the open wound of colonialism" (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 17). This open wound continues to be experienced by a diversity of the world's peoples in their bodies and in their flesh, the latter conceived as "a site of experiences of resistance to such interventions" (Olarte-Sierra 2025, 3).

In this perspective, we seek to place the sense of women's emancipation evidenced in SMG's novels in the North American context of their writing, publishing, and reading: that of the hegemony of white feminism, which Celenis Rodríguez Moreno defines, from a Latin American perspective, as that which "reveals itself as colonial in its analysis of Black, Indigenous and poor *mestizas* ... it assigns itself the role of saviour of these women and the civilizing role of these communities in a manner that is too similar to colonizing enterprises and the apparatus of development" (2014, 32; our translation). White feminism then inscribes its particular take on whiteness and coloniality in the works of a young Mexican-Canadian writer and her relationship with the country in which she was born and raised. Hence the question: what is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*? Or, in what way(s) is *Mexican Gothic* Mexican?

Multiple Perspectives

This is not a moralizing question, nor is it, in and of itself, normative. In characterizing SMG's works as North American rather than Mexican (or indeed Canadian), we are not making a value judgement or claiming that some "real" Mexican identity lies elsewhere. We are making the sociological argument, rather, that the conditions of possibility for the existence of these very specific works have an impact on the content of the works. This is not to say that they are good or bad, but rather that they are what they are, in large part, because of the world in which they were born. Put another way, by situating SMG biographically and by referencing her main audience / market, we are sketching a sociological framework that would need further development but for which space is lacking. In so doing, we are *not* looking down on them from some elevated literary critical perspective.

Our objective is to begin to address the demands of the open colonial wound. We point to the continued struggles for social justice that demand epistemological, cultural, political, and economic recognition, and we emphasize a recognition of the flesh of very important but marginalized female characters in SMG's novels: a flesh that resists. Our question and objective are informed, in this spirit, by multiple perspectives: cultural studies and North American studies, the sociology of literature, and Latin American decolonial feminist theory and Gothic studies, from Mexico and from Canada.

We approach North America and its component parts from a decolonial perspective, and *Mexican Gothic* from both Gothic and decolonial perspectives. Rebecca Duncan argues that Decolonial Gothic is the expression of those who have been marginalized by the perverse matrix of coloniality at the intersection of capitalism and the modern project. It makes visible the colonial differences that continue to organize the world, while foregrounding the vantage point of those who have been violently marginalized (Duncan 2022). As such, decolonial concepts can serve as an entry point to analyze and engage with colonial power and to understand Gothic works (Duncan 2022).

It is because, like Duncan, we are committed to the project of decoloniality that we analyze SMG's work in the after-glow of the high anticolonial and feminist praise that it has received. This praise, not coincidentally, aligns with *Mexican Gothic's* ostensible valuation of its characters (good, nationalist Mexican *mestizas*, bad neocolonialist English men) and SMG's own commentary on her novel. In a "Letter from the author" in the book club guide at the end of

Mexican Gothic's trade paperback edition, she situates her novel within the history of Mexico and of the "mining ghost towns" that "carry with them the traces of colonial rule and all its excesses" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 307). She adds:

The predominant laborers in these towns were Indigenous people who were forced to work the mines through several systems—slavery, *encomienda*, and *repartimiento* ... —and were often abused, toiling in bad conditions. Those who did not labor in the mines might still feel the brunt of Spanish rule, by being driven from their traditional lands... After the Spaniards, there came other powers to pry the earth for silver. (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 307)

To make her outlook absolutely clear, she concludes: "I suppose I could have called the book *Postcolonial Gothic*, but that seems so much longer and less zesty. *Mexican Gothic* expresses the haunting feeling I had when we drove through Mexico looking at the remains of towns from another era" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 308).

We address the question of the Mexican-ness of *Mexican Gothic* by first painting a portrait of SMG's women—not only her protagonists, but also some secondary and often marginal(ized) women who nonetheless play a pivotal part in this and her other novels. First, there are her young protagonists and the ways in which their search for emancipation is formulated. From the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, these young women struggle under the weight of patriarchal domination and seek liberation through a mixture of modern education and financial independence. Markers of their sought emancipation include, in the late nineteenth century, a scientific education; in the early twentieth century, an attraction to cars, modern dance halls and the flapper style of dress and hair-styling; and in the 1950s, smoking and a university education. This is a script of women's advancement that tracks white feminism closely and is utterly familiar to SMG's primary readership: American women who buy and read novels, particularly so-called "romantasy" novels (so baptized by #BookTok). To repeat: we are not condemning these reading women or the writers who speak to them. We are instead pointing out the perspectives that particular readers might find readily familiar, the connection between what readers read, who they are, and how they are ever becoming who they are.

Then, we focus on the other female characters and their worldviews and aspirations, who are both kept at the periphery of the stories *and* peculiarly essential to the success of the heroines. Again, we focus on *Mexican Gothic*, but there are three such women in three novels—Marta Duval in *Mexican Gothic*, Cándida Cordero in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (Moreno-Garcia 2020) and Ramona in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* (Moreno-Garcia 2022)—who play key roles, providing *the* solution to a major problem that the protagonists cannot solve on their own, a solution that is rooted in ancient traditions and practices of *México profundo*.

And so we seek to understand how these specific characters, the stories and the worlds in which they operate came to be created—by this particular writer positioned as she is. To do so, we sketch the relationship between SMG's North American circumstances and the general tenor of our six novels, with *Mexican Gothic* front and centre. Of particular interest here—although we do not have the space to describe specifics—is the strangely weak sense of place that pervades all these books. In this perspective, we are in full agreement with Elizabeth Nichols who, in her review of *Mexican Gothic*, wrote that she was "disappointed in how little the specificity of place (Mexico) appeared in the novel" (Nichols 2021, 112). Also notable is the consistently negative portrayal of the author's country of birth, which she left as a young adult. Mexico City's streets late at night, early in *Mexican Gothic*, for example, are anonymous and could be anywhere. Characters identified as French or British could just as easily be German or Swedish. Most tellingly perhaps, in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau*, SMG's transformation of the doctor from a British scientist in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* into a French one is striking (Moreno-Garcia 2022): what difference does it make? Although other factors would come into play to understand these aspects of her stories, SMG's multifaceted remoteness from her country of origin cannot be discounted. As her own comment quoted above flags, perhaps to an inadvertent degree, *Mexican Gothic*'s haunted mood came to her when driving through and "looking at the remains of towns from another era" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 308). The (touristic?) gaze that is revealed is Northern and whitened, two characteristics that bring us back to the Decolonial Gothic.

White Feminism, *Mestizaje*, and Decolonial Feminisms

The narrative analysis of the female characters of *Mexican Gothic* brings with it particular kinds of complexity that demand attention. Because of the in-betweenness that characterizes SMG's writing locus and the open colonial wound that her writing embodies and attempts to address, we must speak of the violence, abuse, oppression, slavery, and silencing that women from the South, and notably Mexico, have experienced and continue to experience (Curiel 2007, 98). The narratives of the powerful who have demonized Southern women are historical, multilayered, and situated (Hurtado 2019). To unpack them in Mexico, we draw from the works of Latin American decolonial feminists.

Inspired by Black and intersectional feminisms, María Lugones expands and elaborates on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2007, 171) by thinking about decoloniality alongside intersectionality. She brings to light the "modern/colonial gender system" that produces both race and gender in Latin America (Lugones 2008, 77). As Lugones explains, hegemonic feminisms led by white, middle-class women of the North criticized the construction of the female gender without recognizing the racialization of those narratives: non-white peoples did not have a place, to the point that non-white peoples in Latin America were sexualized but not gendered, and so were perceived as animals (without the masculine/feminine characteristics of humans). Even when Latin America's non-white women were "gendered," they did not receive the privileges of white women (Lugones 2008).

In one of its many elaborations among decolonial feminists, this gendered complexity has led to a distinction between the body and the flesh. While the body has been the site of colonial control in its becoming racialized and gendered, flesh is the site of creative resistance (Olarite-Sierra 2025). Flesh calls on us to always remember that the colonial wound has not closed and to look into the everyday lives of non-white women in Latin America, how they experience the system that has oppressed them for centuries, and how they navigate that oppression.

The wounds of the modern/colonial gender system in Mexico are expressed through *mestizaje* and its profound complexities and contradictions. One of the main pillars of modern Mexican national identity, *mestizaje* has been the building block both of racism and of the claim that racism doesn't exist in Mexico because we are all *mestizos* (Moreno Figueroa 2010). As Mónica Moreno Figueroa explains, this latter trope is the result of a homogenizing effect of *mestizaje* that naturalizes/hides whiteness as a core pillar of Mexican structures. This is fundamentally different from the way *mestizaje* is understood in other contexts and groups, as in the Chicano community in the United States, for example, where it can be an identity of political resistance to white hegemony (Curiel 2007).

In Mexico, *mestizaje* began during La Colonia (1521–1810) as a Spanish racial category produced in a context of slavery, exploitation, rape, and abuse of Indigenous communities, that named the mix of a Spanish and an Indigenous person. After the independence of Mexico and through to the beginning of the twentieth century, *mestizaje* became the symbol of national identity as designed by Mexican politicians and thinkers who forcefully admired and preferred the modern European ingredient in the Mexican mix. Conversely, they discriminated against Indigenous communities and their ways of life, actively planning their disappearance through institutional and policy-based "progressive" biosocial whitening. This is the project of "La Raza Cósmica" formulated and promoted by José Vasconcelos, founder of the Mexican Ministry of Education and Dean of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) (discussed briefly in *Mexican Gothic*): the denigration of the Indigenous and the elevation of the whitened *mestizo*, who is mixed but has whitened socially and culturally by adopting the markers of European modernity.

"*Mestizaje* logics," in Moreno-Figueroa's formulation, are "a variety of strategies of racial differentiation that permeate social life" (Moreno Figueroa 2010, 389). As distributed intensities, these logics allow racism to exist in a normalized way so that people, while experiencing it in their everyday, don't recognize it as such and therefore do not see the grave effects it has on their lives, only perceiving it in moments when racism is blatant and dramatic (Moreno Figueroa 2010). In this sense, racial logics are not only about skin colour but also about class, education, and Mexico's Northern-influenced hegemonic culture. This is a completely *embodied* hegemony, in that the enactment/embodiment of *mestizaje* determines social inclusion and exclusion. As *mestizaje* logics are the anchor and pivot of the

modern/colonial gender system in Mexico, we will refer to this complex as Mexico's *mestizaje system*. This concept sheds light on the racialization of women and grounds Mexican decolonial feminists' denunciation of the unquestioned adoption of "white feminism" by elite and middle-class women. White feminism among the whitened *mestizas* in Mexico has considered Indigenous and Afro-descendant women as "incapable of agency, stuck in primitive patriarchal societies—even more violent than western patriarchy" (Rodríguez Moreno 2014, 32; our translation).

Rodríguez Moreno's analysis shows that racialization and gender go hand-in-hand and are articulated to social class—the higher the social class, the whiter the expectation. As such, working women are racialized as Indigenous or non-whitened and poor *mestizas* when they labour in domestic service. This is a legacy of colonization, when Black and Indigenous women were forced into this kind of work (Saldaña Tejeda 2013). The daily proximity that domestic work fosters intensifies this legacy, for instance, by feeding the belief among middle-class, whitened *mestizas* that domestic workers are dangerous, threatening the whitened family with contamination and sexual perversion. This is the source of the pejorative and yet common reference to these workers as "gatitas" or "gatas" (female kittens or cats) by middle-class families (Saldaña Tejeda 2013), where female cats are seen as perfidious. In this *mestizaje system*, then, the bodies of non-whitened *mestizas*, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, and others, are sexualized, demonized, and instrumentalized.

The gendering of all these women's bodies is always dependent on the *mestizaje* logics that are operating in a specific context. But this is not the end of the story. The open wound calls for careful observation, not only of the systems that dominate the body, but also of the resisting flesh that is sentient, remembers, and "knows how to navigate experiences through quick reactions and how to not navigate experiences by refusing to act" (Hurtado 2019, xviii). Following Roberta Hurtado, we understand the sentient flesh as that which operates at the level of the minor, of everyday survival action subverting the powers that have attempted against its very life (2019).

The Mexican Women of Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Mexico's *mestizaje system* that has dominated female bodies while being resisted by their flesh is central to our analysis of *Mexican Gothic* as a Gothic novel that narrates the experiences of those who have traditionally been known as a Gothic other. Using the traditional tropes of the Gothic novel (dark castles or houses, excesses of power, mystery, ghosts, and spectres), SMG moves toward what Duncan calls the "decolonial gothic" (Duncan 2022, 306): she centres the narrative on Noemí Taboada, a dark-skinned *mestiza* sent to rescue her cousin Catalina from High Place, the isolated home, high on a hill, of the white, British dynasty unto whom the novel shifts the monstrosity. This family, the Doyles, have exploited the people of the local community to the point of uncounted deaths, and are attempting to do the same with Noemí and Catalina. Here, SMG unmasks the colonizing power that has organized the town for centuries.

This seemingly decolonial shift has been praised by scholars such as Melissa Castillo-Garsow and Matthew Cutter. For Castillo-Garsow, through *Mexican Gothic*, SMG has given voice to the colonized peoples of Mexico with her representation of High Place as a microcosm of the horrors of colonialism and racial supremacy that Noemí then reveals and destroys (Castillo-Garsow 2024). For Cutter, *Mexican Gothic* is a story of Noemí and Catalina, two women who represent the difficulties of living in a colonial society that systematically "looks down on them for their mestizo heritage" (Cutter 2021, 113) (this, despite their clearly belonging to the country's elite). Although *Mexican Gothic* shows these evils of colonialism and a Mexican *mestiza's* resistance, it obscures the deeper racial relations that underpin the *mestiza* heroine's circumstance.

In *Mexican Gothic*, *mestizaje* and gender underpin Noemí's actions. This is also the case of Carlota in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* and Casiopea in *Gods of Jade and Shadow*. But in the power relations and hierarchies that constitute Mexico's *mestizaje system*, not all *mestizas/os* are positioned identically. For example, Noemí is described as darker-skinned than Catalina (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 29) but this does not place her within the vulnerable, discriminated, and marginalized non-whitened *mestizol/a* population. Her elite socio-economic status, the fact that she has a university edu-

cation from a private institution, and her participation in and adhesion to Mexican nationalism's hegemonic culture of whitened *mestizaje*, position her among the more powerful and privileged classes of Mexican society.

In several passages of the novel, we encounter Noemí as a young socialite who is supported by her family's economic prosperity and prestige. She has attended private religious schools that provide her with the "proper" manners of any elite young lady of the time, and she has attended the Feminine University of Mexico. All this allows her an understanding of the power dynamics of gender, as she looks for ways to push back, for example by demanding to register in an MA program in anthropology at UNAM. This thoroughly modern ambition to attain university-level knowledge is shared by other protagonists in the SMG universe, such as Carlota in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* and Casiopea in *Gods of Jade and Shadow*.

Noemí arrives at High Place as a woman of privilege with a certain amount of power. However, High Place is different. Poised at the edge of a mining town first controlled by the Spanish who enslaved its people, it is isolated geographically, facilitating and expressing the Doyle family's aloofness from post-revolutionary Mexican society. The moment Noemí enters the house, her social standing as an elite woman drops dramatically in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, in the eyes of most of the Doyle family, Noemí—like Catalina before her—is no more than a sexualized female who will serve reproductive and economic purposes. But it is also because she belongs to Mexico's ruling elite that she—after Catalina—is even considered for such a debased role.

The novel's critique continues by showing that *mestiza* women such as Noemí are learned, cultivated, valuable, and resourceful. During her first encounter with the patriarch, Howard Doyle, Noemí responds to his clearly racist attacks by referencing Manuel Gamio, father of Mexican Anthropology, and his recognition of positive traits in Indigenous communities (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). But while Gamio rejected the notion of the evilness in Indigenous Peoples, his objective was to know them so as to integrate them gradually into western culture, taking the best of them to create the *mestizo* fusion with western culture and building a strong foundation for the nation (Reynoso Jaime 2013). That Noemí references Gamio positively hints at the complex and unacknowledged racial politics that anchor *Mexican Gothic's* narrative.

As we have discussed, the Mexican state has been built on the foundation of the *mestizaje system*. This reality underpins *Mexican Gothic* which, by not recognizing it, reproduces it—as when Noemí calls uncritically on Manuel Gamio's outlook. Indeed, the narrative is comfortably built within a racist normalization in Mexico that only recognizes very specific social configurations as problematic (Moreno Figueroa 2010), such as the one where Noemí finds herself devalued among Britons in High Place. This normalization of racism is rooted in the modern/colonial gender system. While Noemí is appalled at the way she is treated by Howard and his son—as a stupid, impertinent, and sexualized female who can be violated at will—her interactions with the local healer, Marta Duval, are highly revealing of the way Noemí and the novel itself adhere completely to Mexico's *mestizaje system*.

Noemí's first visit with Marta—which is also her first outing in the village—aims to procure a traditional medicine for what ails Catalina. She encounters an old woman with a long braid and a blue apron sitting outside her small house, peeling peanuts. The house is full of plants, candles, hanging flowers, and herb-filled bottles (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). Although the novel is not explicit about Marta being Indigenous, the description of her looks and of her demeanour in this first encounter racializes her as either Indigenous or a non-whitened *mestiza*, and marks her as a *curandera* (a characterization confirmed by SMG in the book club guide) (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). In addition to the blue apron, which has traditionally been associated with domestic workers (who are racialized because of their work) and Indigenous women, her knowledge of herbs and medicine is also a sign of racialization. Before this encounter, Noemí already knew of the existence of healers, having read about them in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, the very book that had sparked her interest in anthropology (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). This contrast—Marta's traditional knowledge, Noemí's book learning—highlights the gulf between them, not only of class but also of "race," culture, and knowledge.

Up to this point, the narrative had portrayed Noemí as a strong Mexican *mestiza*, a feminist who questions and resists the Doyle's colonial and patriarchal oppression. This emancipatory positioning falls apart in this encounter with Marta as she performs fully the social and "racial" distance between them. It is not only that she questions the veracity and effectiveness of local knowledges, she also questions Marta's intentions and looks down on her. After Noemí asks for the medicine, she also wants to hear the story of the Doyle's:

"It's a famous story around these parts. I can tell it, but it'll cost you a little."

"You're rather mercenary. I'm already going to pay for the medicine."

"We've got to eat. Besides, it's a good story, and no one knows it as well as I do."

"So, you're a healer and a storyteller." (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 67)

Having mocked Marta, Noemí agrees to pay and offers her a cigarette. Marta smiles and takes two, dropping them in her apron's pocket. Noemí thinks that Marta will smoke them later or sell them (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). She understands that Marta is poor, that her medicine is somehow helping her cousin, and that she knows things about the Doyle's that could be useful to her. Yet, the passage intimates that Noemí believes Marta to be dishonest and possibly trying to take advantage of her, knowing that Noemí is wealthy—Marta has noticed and commented on the young socialite's nice shoes (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). This kind of exchange is commonplace in Mexico and it shows the ways in which non-whitened *mestizas* and Indigenous women are positioned as racialized females, not women. They are suspect, they can be perverse, even dangerous. In Marta's smarts, Noemí sees the kind of deviousness that whitened society identifies, for instance, as animal, cat-like.

But Marta knows! The actions that Noemí interprets as devious, are Marta's knowledge of how to survive. While the narrative racializes her body, it also discloses inadvertent hints of flesh resistance, such as when she insists on being paid for telling her story. Her short scenes are instrumental to Noemí's purposes and, structurally, to SMG's own purpose of telling Noemí's story—not Marta's. At the same time, these glimpses of Marta are illustrative of the racial politics of the novel and of Mexico: *Mexican Gothic* and its whitened *mestiza* protagonist want the reader to understand Marta's responses as mercenary; we, however, see them as the flesh that knows how to resist and survive.

The encounter between Noemí and Marta is not that of two women. It is the encounter of a *mestiza* woman of privilege and a racialized female. This is an interesting shift: Noemí is a privileged whitened *mestiza* at home and a racialized female in High Place, and she goes back to being the high-class and whitened *mestiza* as soon as she encounters Marta, whom she racializes. And while Marta's knowledge and potion end up being the key to uncovering the Doyle's secret and to saving Noemí, Catalina, and the family's embattled nephew, Francis, this does not make her the story's heroine: as written in the novel, she is merely a tool in Noemí's adventure. There are similar encounters in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* involving Ramona, the domestic worker in Dr. Moreau's house; and in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* with Cándida Cordero, a witch called upon to provide crucial help. By othering such non-whitened *mestizas*, these encounters undermine the emancipatory credentials of *Mexican Gothic* and these other novels.

This analysis of Noemí and Marta shows that Noemí adheres to what decolonial feminists denounce: a white feminism that does not recognize the sexualized, racialized, marginalized position of other women. While *Mexican Gothic* gives us a white feminist critique of Mexican colonization and patriarchy, it does not in any way question Mexico's *mestizaje system* and the coloniality that underpins it. In fact, it reproduces them by erasing the origin, social position, and importance of the "other" women, making them into mere tools in the hands of the privileged, whitened *mestiza* heroines. This is not strange or unusual in Mexico. On the contrary, it is precisely the norm that is criticized by Latin American decolonial feminists.

The Places and Peoples of Silvia Moreno-Garcia: Elements of a Sociological Analysis

Much of the condition of in-betweenness that characterizes SMG's work is embedded in the transnational production of contemporary culture and resonates with the clearly ambivalent relationship to Mexico that pervades her novels. SMG sets almost all her work in Mexico and presents the country in a largely negative light; she writes from Canada, and publishes with great success in the United States with the world's biggest trade publisher (Random House) for a readership that is primarily made up of white, American, middle-class women. None of these features of SMG's writing and publishing circumstances is merely anecdotal or insignificant. Published writers work in and for specific markets, on the basis of whatever insights and understandings their social world(s) produce and make available to them. And so the novels' surface commitment to anticolonialism is brought into being.

SMG writes in English, having explained in a number of interviews that "it was the most practical thing. I wanted to write fantastic fiction at the time, and there are no fantastic fiction imprints in Mexico, or in most of Latin America, and there were very few in Spain at the time" (Flood 2022). She has also said that she was not living in Mexico by the time she began publishing in earnest and was thus not part of the literary and publishing milieu there, which would have facilitated her publishing in Spanish (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center 2021). This is a rather different kind of claim, focusing on her personal circumstances instead of an absence of publishing opportunities in general in her chosen genre(s)—Gothic, at least in the case of *Mexican Gothic*. As Castillo-Garsow has noted in this connection, Latin America's tradition of magic realism has explicitly rejected the primarily English tradition of the Gothic, as a way to affirm an anticolonialist independence.

SMG's turn to the English language and to the (traditional) Gothic, away from the Latin American fantastic, sits awkwardly with the anticolonialist credentials that she claims and that her critics so praise. This awkwardness need not be fatal: the argument that the English Gothic tradition can be turned against its own patriarchal and colonialist weight may have merit. But that question lies beyond our purpose here. In any case, none of the above should be read as some kind of condemnation of SMG for her life choices or preferred genre(s): millions of people leave their country of origin for a variety of good reasons, and she is perfectly entitled to have a complicated relationship with the place where she grew up. By the same token, no writer from a particular place is obligated to operate within that place's dominant traditions.

In this case, it is easy to find praiseworthy SMG's explicit agenda of shining a light on important episodes of Mexico's history *for a primarily American audience*. Indeed, *Mexican Gothic* has been a "New York Times Bestseller" and was featured in a national reading contest in Canada (whose market is dwarfed by the American) in 2023; by the summer of 2026, the trade paperback edition had reached at least its fifteenth printing. *Mexican Gothic* has had no comparable impact in Mexico. Then, how exactly SMG's novels perform that agenda is its own question, one we have addressed primarily through our analysis of key female characters and the tensions they reveal between Moreno-Garcia's claimed anticolonialism and her novel's participation in Mexico's *mestizaje system*; and secondarily as regard her chosen genre(s) and language. Regardless, our purpose is neither to praise nor condemn SMG and her novels: it is to assess critically how these novels work and what made them culturally and socially possible. Here, then, we explore how SMG's circumstances constitute conditions of possibility for writing her stories and characters in the way that she has and does.

SMG is very good at plotting, and at telling a story that you want to follow: as a reader, you want to know what happens next, and next, and next, until the end. But it also becomes quickly obvious (within a page of any of these novels) that descriptions of people and places are generic and characters' psychology often strains belief. Still, the stories move forward efficiently: we want to know what happens next. This is what is needed in a market where people are "reading for the plot" (Brooks 1984)—meaning that they are far more interested in *what* story is being told, than in *how* it is being told. That is a huge market, in several genres. SMG has said in interviews that she has an affinity for the pulp fiction of the fifties, and that she writes fast with a view to a paycheck—not in any mercenary sense, in her

telling, but because she is a working writer with a family to feed (Moreno-Garcia and Tidhar 2020; Jackson 2020). Indeed, in the afterword to *Velvet Was the Night*, SMG writes, “[m]y novel is noir, pulp fiction...” (Moreno-Garcia 2021b, 281).

Then, it turns out that there is not much that is Mexican Gothic in *Mexican Gothic*. In other words, whatever Mexican Gothic might be, it is not in this novel. Noemí and Catalina are perfectly generic, modern upper-middle class human beings, as are Virgil and Francis Doyle—easily recognizable by your average American reader. Meanwhile, it is the Doyle patriarch and his family history who bring the Gothic to unsuspecting and victimized Mexicans. As we argued above, in agreement with Castillo-Garsow and Cutter, SMG skillfully flips Gothic’s traditional monster position so that here it is the dominant English who are the monsters. In this perspective, Mexico’s disappearance from the book’s title in Spanish (simply, *Gótico*)—and only in Spanish, from all other translations that we have found that kept the original title—perhaps begins to make sense: Mexican readers, who constitute the world’s biggest Spanish-speaking market, might wonder how this Gothic is Mexican.

Indeed, Mexico often seems absent from *Mexican Gothic* and from *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau*—especially in the former novel, set as it is in an English-style house overlooking an English-style village. More broadly, the setting for the action in both novels is an isolated place that is a kind of no-place, run by Europeans who have basically no interest in Mexico and Mexicans other than as instruments in their various enterprises. In these novels, European men drive the action, while the (male) Mayan god does the same in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* and the (male) French demon has the last word.

Conclusion

SMG’s major American success was *Mexican Gothic*, in which Mexico basically disappears from Mexico, foregrounding the Englishness of her Gothic. In the much more Mexican *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2020), Casiopea pines to leave her town and to experience the life depicted in Hollywood magazines: 1920s (American) flappers with short hair and daring dresses, dancing the new (American) dances, driving (American) cars. The novel ends with her driving away with a French demon, either to (American) New Orleans or (Canadian) Quebec.

In the end, there is something weirdly, truly North American in these novels—and we might add, weirdly and truly Canadian. Again, this is neither praise nor reproach. Rather, it is a recognition of the conditions of SMG’s writing and publishing: the translation of *mestizaje* from Mexico to the North has informed the ways in which she depicts Mexico. But being at a (Canadian) remove from that public also would have an impact. Canada is, among other things, a land of immigration in which cultural differences are omnipresent and, at least in part for this reason, flattened to kinds of distinctiveness that translate easily and are at low risk of giving offence to most anyone.

Ultimately, there is also something profoundly Mexican in these novels, that is further affirmed in the anticolonialist and feminist praise that SMG has received. Her novels and her fans such as Castillo-Garsow and Woods construct the anticolonial and feminist struggles as a binary: there are the European, colonialist, patriarchal men and there are the young, educated, modern *mestizas*. But in the margins of the novels, we also find the *mestiza* heroines’ necessary and overlooked helpers: the Marta Duvals of this world, and of SMG’s fiction. Just as the real Mexico needs *and* marginalizes and erases these racialized women, SMG’s novels need the solutions provided by Marta Duval and her likes—without giving them their narrative due. This is a remarkable twist, very much the open colonial wound in practice, and perhaps a kind of *return of the repressed*, whereby SMG’s stories can’t help but bring these invisible women to the rescue, reiterating the actual structure of Mexican society.

So, the anticolonial and feminist struggle is structurally (at least) a triad, not a binary. Making it look like a binary affirms and reproduces the nationalist narrative of Mexico’s (and other countries’) fight for independence from Spain, a fight that erased First Peoples (the third term of this struggle). For all its negative portrayals and criticisms of Mexico, SMG’s fiction fully mirrors its structural coloniality and patriarchy. Canada and the United States have been en-

acting their own versions of this obscured triadic relationship, making SMG's form of anticolonialism perfectly intelligible and agreeable from San Antonio to Vancouver as it affirms the two northern countries' own stories of national becoming.

Much more could be said about this isomorphy between Mexican society's erasure of racialized people (women, especially) and SMG's own. We may draw for instance on Lucien Goldmann's interest in the question of where the novel comes from, socially speaking, as a literary form in capitalist society and, as such, how it resonates with the society / societies in which it is read (Goldmann 1964). Or on Benedict Anderson's conception of how the novel contributes to the construction of a national public (Anderson 1983).

For now, we do have an answer to our question. What, then, is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic* and SMG's other novels? The answer is in the structures of patriarchal and colonial power that these novels do not question, resist, or make visible, as their narratives mirror the positions and outlooks of Mexico's elites and middle classes. These are not narratives of transgression, they are novels that uphold the status quo of Mexico's complex *mestizaje system*.

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