

# Grotesquely Gothic Textual Overflow: Depictions of Generational Female Trauma in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*



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## Abstract

This article explores the connection between literary trauma theory and the generational female trauma in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's contemporary novel, *Mexican Gothic*. This novel, clearly situated in the Female Gothic tradition, expands on common Gothic tropes, and it is argued it presents the Female Gothic genre as one that inherently deals with the trauma of women forced into an oppressive silencing by patriarchal powers. Through the characters of Agnes and Ruth, this paper argues trauma is portrayed as sensory, textual overflow, drawing on the concept from trauma theorist Joshua Pederson. Through sensory, highly detailed and grotesque depictions of women's experiences of trauma, *Mexican Gothic* demonstrates the power of the Female Gothic genre to explicate trauma while emphasizing the grotesque oppression women face at the hands of manipulative patriarchal power, both in and out of fiction.

## Key words

*Female Gothic, trauma, patriarchy, haunting, gender oppression*

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Prominent Gothic scholar Diana Wallace, in the introduction to her book *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, writes how Ann Radcliffe is one of the first authors to establish the Female Gothic genre, as her novels feature “heroines in flight from male tyrants across fantastical landscapes and in search of lost mothers entombed in womb-like dungeons beneath patriarchal castles” (Wallace and Smith 2009, 2). These have become classic Female Gothic tropes: heroines attempting to flee the dominion of male tyrants while their mothers haunt them, lost to time and silenced by trauma. Those heroines’ experiences mirror those of women who, for hundreds of years, have been writing about their silencing in society and the suppression of their voices by the men they were led– or forced– to trust, and the pattern begins with their mothers. David Punter and Elisabeth Bronfen, experts on Gothic culture, discuss these links of violence and trauma in the Gothic genre and note how these stories tend to “exist

only in endless, unacknowledged recounting, a message that is absolutely necessary and absolutely without origin [...] the structure of the enigma” (Punter and Bronfen 2001, 4). The horrors endured by the women in the narratives become something elusive, without definite origin, as the traumatic experiences they endure are generational and repetitive. But they start with some mother forced into silent oppression, and feminist scholar Claire Kahane explicates the key trope of the Female Gothic specifically as the relationship between those lost mothers and the heroine, who must contend with that mother’s trauma. Kahane writes that “the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all encompassing” is “a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (Kahane 2019, 336). The focus on these lost mothers as the genesis of patterns of patriarchal oppression is key to the Female Gothic genre. Further, scholar Edina Szalay discusses the important role of these Gothic mothers in the daughter’s psychology: “in the Female Gothic, the most important legacy daughters inherit from the mothers appear to be a general fear of femaleness: the female role, female sexuality, and female physiology. What the mother’s body chiefly embodies is female entrapment and an enclosed space of violation” (Szalay 2000, 191). Thus, Female Gothic authors convey the damaging, recurring patterns of patriarchal oppression that compound with each generation of women until they reach a bursting point, and the current heroine works to stop that pattern and give a voice to past generations of silenced women.

Published in 2020, Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic* revitalizes everything grotesque in Female Gothic novels and builds upon that legacy of haunted, trapped, and oppressed women who work to cease generational trauma. While Moreno-Garcia situates this novel firmly in the Female Gothic tradition, postcolonial threats are essential to the story as well, featuring prominently an English patriarchy that colonized the narrative’s rural Mexican town. The grounding of this novel in the parallel Female Gothic and postcolonial genres further underscores the novel’s tyrannical men, emphasizing how generations of women under their control have been exploited like the land they colonized. Indeed, the story begins with Noemí Taboada, the heroine, receiving a frightening letter from her newly married cousin, Catalina, who feels imprisoned in High Place by her husband, Virgil Doyle, and his family. In her letter, Female Gothic tropes are immediately evident, including augmented, hyper-detailed images of the horrors she experiences. Due to her forced confinement in High Place, reality becomes incomprehensible to Catalina, who describes her new home as “sick with rot [...] stinks of decay [...] I bar my door but still they come, they whisper at nights and I am so afraid of these restless dead, these ghosts, fleshless things” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 7-8). Noemí is coerced by her father to venture into this danger to save her cousin and uncover the secrets of High Place. However, as the classic Female Gothic heroine, Noemí endures her own traumatic experiences before she can understand the true horrors perpetuated by the Doyles.

Indeed, this novel works with literary trauma theory; specifically, the narrative device of the gloom functions as a liminal space wherein the silenced women of High Place communicate the trauma they've endured. Joshua Pederson, a literary trauma scholar, describes how "traumatic memories [...] are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones" (Pederson 2014, 339). Thus, literary critics must be "open to the possibility that authors may record trauma with excessive detail and vibrant intensity [...] thus, readers looking for representations of trauma may turn not to textual absence but to textual overflow [...]" (Pederson 2014, 339). While trauma may be perceived as a force that silences survivors through guilt or shame, it is also a force too powerful to be contained. Thus in literature, trauma often explodes as textual overflow, or hyper-detailed images. Pederson explains how "traumatic memory is often multisensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well" (Pederson 2014, 339). Kahane mentions a similar focus on body horror and sensory details as part of the grotesquery of "modern Gothic" as she writes, "repeatedly [...] when the unseen is given visual form, when we lose the obscurity of the Gothic darkness, the Gothic focuses on distorted body images and turns into the grotesque" (Kahane 2019, 343). These grotesque, sensory descriptions are immediately evident in Catalina's letter and how she explains her feelings. She cannot comprehend the horrors she sees and feels, so she focuses on the details she can perceive to convey her experiences. She mentions in her letter how "I am bound, threads like iron through my mind and my skin [...]" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 8) and later, once Noemí arrives at High Place, she constantly complains about "the darkness and the damp. It's always damp and dark and so very cold" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 49). Her experiences are focused on the senses, as she cannot verbalize or make sense of the trauma she has endured in High Place at the hands of her husband and his family. The grotesque textual overflow is seen through each woman's experiences of trauma in High Place. More specifically, the "gloom" is a liminal space where these women live, as film critic and Gothic scholar Coşkun Liktör describes, "ghosts of female gothic" – "suspended between life and death, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality [...] representing the plight of women who are silenced, marginalized, disempowered, hence virtually rendered invisible in patriarchal culture" (Liktör 2016, 152). Therefore, *Mexican Gothic* presents the Female Gothic genre as one that is inherently grotesque, featuring heroines who must deal with generational trauma suffered by their predecessors, and the gloom allows those violently silenced women to gain back their voices. Further, the gloom forces Noemí to contend with their trauma and her own, allowing her to gather strength from their pain, stop their oppression, and guide those traumatized women to peace.

As soon as Noemí arrives at High Place, she fights oppressors, such as the patriarch Howard Doyle and his son Virgil, but also a matriarch who perpetuates the men's pattern of domination— Florence, Howard's niece. Feminist scholar Emma Domínguez-Rué explicates this idea of females forced into conflict, writing how "according to patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, relationships among women can never involve co-operation and solidarity: their unequal position in society results in mutual jealousy, competition for male attention, and identity only in relation to men" (Domínguez-Rué 2014, 129). Under Howard's thumb of patriarchal authority, women are used to continue the Doyle bloodline; their worth is determined by how well they accomplish that goal. Florence embodies those tropes of jealousy and competition for male attention, as she is hateful towards Noemí because Howard has taken a liking to her as the next child-bearer for the Doyles. Emma Jane Tseris, a mental health scholar focused on gender inequality in psychiatric practices, notes how "understanding the narratives of women means that women are not confined to a one-size-fits-all assessment of their experiences" (Tseris 2013, 161). Francis, Florence's son, divulges to Noemí how "when my mother came of age, Howard tried to... but he was too old, too damaged, to give her a child" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 214). She was too young and now Howard is too injured. Since she cannot be of use to him as a fertile mother and thus worthless, Florence assumes the role of an oppressive mother, manipulating the other women for injured Howard. This is evident when Florence tells Noemí, "you think you have a special power simply because my uncle thinks you possess a pretty face. But that's not a power. It's a liability" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 114). Then, she explains how Howard "simply wants to have you, like a little butterfly in his collection. One more pretty girl" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 248). Unlike the other women who work to usurp the male powers at play, Florence has assumed the role of an oppressive matriarch, maintaining Howard's domination over the other women in High Place and ensuring his exploitation of their bodies. Florence perpetuates Howard's pattern of oppression, and actively works against Noemí's attempts to destroy this traumatizing exploitation.

Noemí realizes the extent of High Place's horrors through the gloom which "records" and harbors the grotesque details and terrific feelings of past High Place women. Francis, Noemí's only male confidant, describes the gloom as "a giant spider's web [...] In that web, we can preserve memories, thoughts [...] We call that repository of our thoughts, of our memories, *the gloom*" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 211). The fungi's mycorrhiza relationship with the Doyles allows Howard to gain immortality as long as an heir is birthed, hence the importance of fertile women. Thus, Howard's entrapment and exploitation lead to generations of women becoming traumatized, having no say in their fates. As Pederson explains, "trauma forces the self into hiding, and while the sensory manifold keeps "recording" sights, sounds, smells, and feelings, the brain fails to work them through" (Pederson 2014, 335). The gloom is this sensory

manifold, holding the key to the Doyle's secrets, allowing silenced generations of women to communicate their trauma. It is a space wherein their experiences are trapped and vividly depicted, as if memories in a sticky web. Here, the textual overflow corresponding with their traumatic experiences is most evident. For example, the first time Noemí sees Agnes, the first woman sacrificed by Howard, her description is highly detailed and grotesque:

It was a woman in a dress of yellowed antique lace. Where her face ought to have been there was a glow, golden like that of the mushrooms on the wall [...] the wall had started to quiver, beating to the same rhythm as the golden woman [...] the floorboards pulsed too; a heart, alive and knowing [...] The woman made a noise, like the crunching of leaves [...] like the buzzing of insects in the pitch-black darkness. (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 56)

Agnes is a golden, glowing, faceless woman, and her presence is accompanied by the grotesque descriptions of the floorboards pulsing to the beat of her heart and the sound of her buzzing, representing her trying to speak. Agnes is foundational to *Mexican Gothic* as she is forced to become the mother and mind of the gloom. Agnes's experience of being sacrificed for the gloom was so horrifying she can no longer communicate properly, and Noemí realizes this after seeing her at the end of the novel:

Noemí stared straight into the face of death. It was the open, screaming maw of a woman, frozen in time. A mummy, a few teeth dangling from her mouth, her skin yellow [...] she was clothed in a different finery: mushrooms hid her nakedness. They grew from her torso and her belly, they grew down her arms and her legs, they clustered around her head creating a crown, a halo, of glowing gold. The mushrooms held her upright, anchored her to the wall, like a monstrous Virgin in a cathedral of mycelium (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 282).

Agnes's decomposing body is found beneath High Place, anchored to the wall, trapped forever as the fungal mother so Howard could have eternal life, and after seeing her decomposing body, Noemí realizes "the buzzing" she has heard "was her voice. [Agnes] could not communicate properly any longer but could still scream of unspeakable horrors inflicted on her," thus "the frightening and twisted gloom that surrounded them was the manifestation of all the suffering that had been inflicted on this woman" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 289). Agnes communicates through images and sounds in the gloom as she cannot speak anymore as Howard murdered her, and Noemí must make sense of these enigmatic messages Agnes conveys. This is in line with how Punter and Bronfen explain, "the child" and in this case Noemí, "possesses only inadequate and imperfect ways to configure or theorise about what is communicated to him" and is "aware yet not aware of the traumatizing power of the

message, unable to escape from its mesmerizing, seductive force” (Punter and Bronfen 2001, 5). Noemí is drawn to these dream-like experiences in the gloom and is desperate to learn more, yet she is unable to piece together the full puzzle until she sees Agnes’s body in the end. Agnes’s mycelium-enabled habitation is thus symbolic of the “absent,” subdued Gothic mother as she is entombed beneath High Place, but she is nonetheless present as she conveys her experiences through her hauntings, desperate to end the cycle of exploitation that began with her.

Ruth is the next generation of silenced, sacrificed women, and similarly conveys her traumatic experiences through the gloom, depicted with grotesque, sensory details to warn Noemí of the danger at High Place. Her experiences are especially violent, as “the excavation of trauma” is tied with “the inevitability of violence as a way of forcing the message into coherence” (Punter and Bronfen 2001, 6). The only way for Ruth to impress upon Noemí the horrors she experienced is to relive the most violent moment of her life, which impresses upon Noemí the extent of Ruth’s trauma which forced her to this violence to escape. When Noemí first realizes she is watching Ruth enact the circumstances of her suicide in a dream, Noemí feels the house as if it is alive and the grotesque descriptions are present to emphasize Ruth’s horrific experience:

Noemí heard a heart beating, as loud as a drum [...] she ventured outside her room to find the place where it was hiding. She felt it beneath her palm [...] felt the wallpaper grow slippery [...] the floor beneath her was wet and soft. It was a sore [...] The wallpaper was peeling, revealing underneath sickly organs [...] Veins and arteries clogged with secret excesses [...] The heart pumped blood and groaned and shivered, and it beat so loudly Noemí thought she’d go deaf. (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 116-7)

Here, Ruth guides Noemí through her most traumatic memory and alludes to Agnes’s haunting presence as she was accompanied by the beating heart earlier and as the mother of the gloom, she “records” the subsequent trauma women endure. Indeed, Ruth’s suicide is described in vivid detail: “there was blood, the dark splatter marking the wall. Noemí watched Ruth fall, her body bending like the stem of a flower” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 117-8). While it is a horrific death and final image, in this moment Ruth exerts some agency and before pulling the trigger, tells Noemí, “I’m not sorry” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 117). Through a violent death at her own hands, Ruth frees herself from Howard’s oppression, and her experience further emphasizes to Noemí the extent to which Howard traumatizes the women of High Place, driving them to commit suicide rather than live under his control.

However, the gloom transmits not just those experiences, but the accompanying feelings which are more powerful than the senses in conveying the women’s traumatic memories. As described immediately after Ruth pulls the trigger,



“The suicide, however, did not unnerve Noemí [...] she felt soothed, she even thought to smile” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 118). Here, Noemí is struck with the relief Ruth felt after killing herself. While it was horrific, her blood splattering against the wall, it was a release from Howard’s torment, and she could almost smile. However, as soon as Agnes appears a moment later, Noemí is overwhelmed by the horror Agnes felt when she was sacrificed against her will. Agnes is described as “the woman with the blur of a face, her whole body rippling, liquid, rushing toward Noemí with a huge open mouth— although she had no mouth— ready to unleash a terrible scream [...] And now Noemí was afraid, now she knew terror [...]” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 118). Ruth and Agnes had startlingly different experiences of trauma. Agnes was left terrified, culminating in fury in the afterlife, whereas Ruth was filled with fury in life and in death is granted relief. The sensory details of the gloom are coupled with the women’s intense emotions during their deaths. Thus, it takes violence, but also violent emotions, for Agnes and Ruth to communicate the horror they experienced. As Punter and Bronfen question, “what new senses would we have to grow, in order to hear the message clearly – and if we ever did, how would we distinguish it from psychotic thought-broadcasting, from the ultimate delusion of the centred self” (Punter and Bronfen 2001, 6)? Moreno-Garcia has created these new senses through the gloom, giving a voice to the voiceless through visceral, multisensory recordings of their trauma, allowing Noemí to uncover the message and ultimately put their spirits to rest and stop the perpetuation of oppression at High Place.

Still, before she can truly understand the trauma of others, Noemí must endure her own horrific experiences, giving her the undeniable motivation to destroy High Place. Noemí’s experiences are described in similarly vivid, grotesque detail, especially when her mind is immersed in the gloom. When she is forced to kiss Howard and consume the fungus from his saliva, it is described thus: “Noemí felt his tongue in her mouth and then saliva burning down her throat... she felt very light; her thoughts were scattered. Drowsy” (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 204). While she cannot make sense of the traumatic experience at first, she enters the gloom and imagines the horrific things figuratively happening to her body:

[...] Noemí looked down at her hands, at her wrist, which itched terribly. Before she could scratch herself pustules erupted and there rose tendrils, like hairs, upon her skin. Her velvety body fruited. Fleshy, white, fan-shaped caps sliced through her marrow and her muscle, and when she opened her mouth liquid poured up, gold and black, like a river that stained the floor [...] Her mouth was full of blood and she spat out her own teeth. (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 208)

While Noemí cannot make literal sense of her trauma in the moment, in the gloom her experience is grounded with visceral bodily distortions which represent what is symbolically happening within her body. Thus, through the intense sensory overflow

present within the gloom, Moreno-Garcia portrays the confused emotions of women forced to endure unimaginable horrors, as well as how this trauma, inherent in the Female Gothic genre, forces itself to be seen and dealt with through violence, and the violent hauntings of Agnes and Ruth convey their experiences to the other women in High Place so they might be released from everlasting torment.

*Mexican Gothic* most notably demonstrates the strength of women when they join forces, having communicated their trauma and worked together towards freedom from their entrapment in High Place. While the patriarchal authority of Howard, Virgil, and Florence would wish them to be silenced and complicit, it is through the gloom that Agnes and Ruth become visible and material, and it is only through female bonding that those patterns of oppression are stopped. Only through Noemí and Catalina working together can they piece together Agnes and Ruth's stories and formulate a plan to destroy High Place. Further, Noemí conjures the powerful emotions these women convey to give her the strength to persist. When Noemí is about to be raped by Virgil, "she thought of Catalina and Ruth and Agnes and the terrible things they'd done to them" and only when she recalled those horrors is she able to turn around, "away from the shimmering [...] and shoved Virgil away with all her might" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 262). Thus, it is through the power of trauma, which compounds with each generation trapped in the gloom, that Noemí musters the strength to fight the patriarchy of High Place. Similarly, in the final climatic sequence as Florence holds Noemí at gunpoint, it is then Catalina who conjures the strength to attack. "A startled flash of recognition came over her and then a spark of rage [...] Catalina became a maenad" stabbing Howard over and over (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 270-1). In that moment, she embodies the rage of the other women, Agnes, Ruth, and herself, who have been violently exploited, attacking like a frenzied woman possessed by the hatred they harbor for Howard. Catalina relays their message of loathing and pain and through the combined strength of the women's trauma, he is destroyed. Noemí further makes sure of this when she "raised the gun and shot Howard twice" (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 274). Here, Noemí reiterates specifically Ruth's message, ensuring the violent end of Howard, allowing herself and Catalina to escape.

Therefore, Howard is destroyed by the power of those he sought to suppress, and the women are released from their torment as the gloom dies with them. When Noemí finally "tossed the lamp against the corpse's face," Agnes's corpse, Noemí is "jolted into complete awareness, the gloom shoving her away" while Virgil, their final antagonist, falls writhing to the floor (Moreno-Garcia 2020, 290). With the destruction of Agnes's corpse, their trauma tangled in the web of the gloom, their experiences unspeakable yet unrelenting, were finally put to rest. Thus, as Pederson claims, this "literature of trauma" conveys the experiences of Agnes and Ruth through the gloom "not as a collection of faltering or failing speech acts but instead



as efforts– no matter how halting– at rehabilitation” (Pederson 2014, 339). That is all these women wanted. They conveyed the horrors of their lives to the next generation of women who could help them. They came as ghosts, as records of their traumatic experiences so that Catalina and Noemí could rehabilitate their spirits and release them from torment. As Kahane claims, “at the Gothic center of the novels, a fearsome figure in the mirror still remains, waiting to be acknowledged” and this was Agnes (Kahane 2019, 341). Agnes’s trauma had to be reckoned with so she could finally rest in peace. The same goes for Ruth, who is desperate to tell her story and escape Howard’s control. It was through the gloom that Agnes and Ruth were given a voice, and by working in conjunction with Catalina and Noemí, Howard and the other perpetrators of patriarchal oppression were destroyed, and the women’s tormented souls could finally rest.

Thus, *Mexican Gothic* explores how generational trauma presents in the Female Gothic genre as grotesque hauntings, mirroring the horrors women face at the hands of oppressors. Further, this trauma must be and can only be resolved by women working together to give a voice and identity back to those silenced by patterns of patriarchal domination. Moreno-Garcia utilizes the gloom as a space wherein those women who lost their voices, literally and symbolically through death and exploitation, can convey their experiences and seek rectification. Indeed, Agnes engulfs High Place in grotesque horror, instigated by the immense trauma she faced at the hands of Howard, and her gloom fills the home with her incomprehensible feelings and memories of her horrific experiences. Without the gloom, Noemí never would have known the truth of Ruth’s horrific life and what drove her to murder and suicide, and Noemí would never have found Agnes’s decomposing body entombed and screaming for release under High Place. In the end, this novel shows how powerful memories and experiences of trauma are and how our minds work to make sense of those inexplicable horrors through a focus on the grotesque sensory details and powerful emotions that accompany trauma. *Mexican Gothic* exemplifies the immense combined strength of women who use their trauma and that of others as motivation to fight against oppression and give women a voice. Thus, it is ultimately a novel that demonstrates the power of the Female Gothic genre to explicate trauma, all while holding a mirror to reality, emphasizing the grotesque oppression women face at the hands of manipulative patriarchal power.

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