Communion and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*

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> 'Yet as a good Catholic you must believe in original sin.'
> 'Perhaps I'm a bad Catholic.'[1]

Noemí, Silvia Moreno-Garcia's heroine in *Mexican Gothic* (2020), wears a rosary for the sake of fashion but finds little comfort in her Catholic religion. Nor does she feel reverence for religious iconography, responding to her impending forced marriage by quipping 'I'll be wed in the Church of the Holy Incestuous Mushroom' (p. 239). And yet, the novel associates elements of the haunted house with the Catholic Church, and is saturated with gothicised religious language and imagery. For Moreno-Garcia, a cursed fungus becomes a medium of communion that binds together a family and grants some of its members eternal life. The mushroom Eucharist requires literal consumption of flesh, riffing on gothic notions of transubstantiation and the vampire. In various ways, this novel's horror descends from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in which the perverse Eucharist of blood binds together evil vampiric communities. Similarly, Moreno-Garcia's distorted fungal Eucharist comments on the damage that communities can cause through warped religious symbols and language. In this essay, I demonstrate how Moreno-Garcia's incorporation of a gothic Eucharist in the vein of long nineteenth-century precursors like *Dracula* emphasises the horrors of a community bound together not by mutual affection or kindness, but through evil enchanted mediums that harm the Doyle family, as well as those they abuse and manipulate. First, I locate *Mexican Gothic* within the gothic tradition and its topoi, before discussing the gothic Eucharist as a symbol that ties the novel to *Dracula* while sharpening *Mexican Gothic's* postcolonial critique. The novel uses the gothic and Catholicism, both discourses of the coloniser, to unveil historic sins that go beyond the literary and that continue to erupt from the dark past and haunt the present.

Mexican Gothic riffs on a variety of gothic traditions, including that of the gothic romance, which can be difficult to define. Holly Hirst notes the limitations of defining the genre purely through the templates of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938).[2] Joanna Russ's collection of gothic-romance topoi, which draws on these

[1] Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic* (Del Rey, 2020), p. 89. All additional references to this text will be cited using page numbers in parentheses in the body of the essay.
[2] Holly Hirst, 'The Gothic Romance', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 357-72 (p. 357).

foundational novels, is nonetheless useful. Russ highlights in particular the house, the good and selfless heroine, isolation in the country, the 'Super-Male' (who is older, brooding, and evokes complicated feelings in the heroine), 'Another Woman' (typically an opposite of the heroine and generally deeply 'immoral'), a 'Buried Ominous Secret' that will inevitably be revealed, and a 'Shadow-Male' (often a marital prospect who appears benign while concealing his heinous and violent crimes from the heroine, who he works to seduce).[3] *Mexican Gothic* features modifications of all of these. The young socialite Noemí Taboada, known for flirtatious behaviour, a budding interest in anthropology, and a flighty approach to her future, travels from Mexico City to High Place, an English estate in rural Mexico, to help her newly married, deeply wholesome cousin Catalina, ill with something far more sinister than the tuberculosis her suspicious new husband Virgil claims she has. The tenacious Noemí is in some ways a reimagined and modern interpretation of Catherine from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847): she is bold, provocative, a little self-absorbed, and invested in the finer things of life. Her cousin Catalina's romantic mindset, maternal personality, and desire to be virtuous align her with gothic ancestors from the pages of Ann Radcliffe's novels, as well as Jane Eyre herself. Meanwhile, Noemí finds the house smelly and damp, filled with creepy servants and foreboding art. Virgil's family, the Doyles, emigrated from England decades ago to open a silver mine and establish High Place, built on the backs of local men whose deaths the family patriarch, Howard Doyle, caused. Although the mine brought them great wealth, it dwindled, and Noemí learns that the family – and the house – have a sinister reputation.

While most other colonisers left during or after the Mexican Revolution, 'the Doyles lingered in this land', where High Place was built to be 'a little piece of England', complete with 'European earth' (p. 18). The Doyle family are not religious in any conventional sense of the word, but Noemí learns, through conversations with locals and engaging unwillingly with the house's spirits, that they serve a different sort of god: Howard Doyle. Centuries ago, he co-opted a pagan religion that incorporated healing mushrooms, shaping its practices with cannibalism and incest so that he could live forever. The spirit of Agnes, his late wife and sister, provides a mind to host this fungal enchantment; her haunting of the house is perhaps a version of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, her body secretly locked away in a tomb, sustaining the Doyle family's magic. Howard believes in eugenics and hopes that incorporating women of colour into his family's bloodline will strengthen his abilities to reincarnate himself, via the

[3] Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 6.4 (1973), pp. 667-70, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1973.00666.

power of enchanted fungi, into the body of his grandson. Completing the family are Francis, Virgil's unintimidating cousin who eventually works to help Noemí, and his mother Florence, a harsh, strict woman who manages the household and worships Howard unquestioningly. As Noemí uncovers the dark secrets of their past and works to save herself, her cousin, and Francis by destroying the house and escaping, the novel explores racism, colonialism, and religious identity. Moreno-Garcia re-envisions the gothic legacy through casting women of colour as gothic heroines who, in this story, save themselves.

At High Place, the shapes and topoi of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic cluster around the Doyle family. One of the most prominent and quintessential gothic motifs in the novel is that of the emergence of historical horrors into characters' presents. Kate Ferguson Ellis writes that the 'failed home', whose disease a gothic heroine has the ability to 'purge', has been a central focal point of the genre since its eighteenth-century emergence.[4] Instead of redeeming this house, however, Noemí works to destroy it, and she can only accomplish these goals by collaborating with the spirits of Agnes, Howard's late sister/wife whose corpse fuels the enchantment on the house; and Ruth, Howard's late daughter/niece who was driven to murder in an attempt to purge the house's evil. Alison Milbank calls the gothic 'the literary form that unites the ruin – the link between the past and present (which also marks their dislocation) – with the imprisoned protagonist, who desires to escape'.[5] Noemí, initially an unwelcome guest at High Place, becomes Howard's next target as he believes he can force her to marry his nephew, whose body he will reincarnate himself into, and procreate with her. Moreno-Garcia therefore pulls from the gothic tradition in which the heroine is trapped in a house that should be safe and in a past that invades the present. Furthermore, Eugenia C. DeLamotte contends that gothic works are primarily concerned with the boundary between the self and the Other.[6] This conflict is central to *Mexican Gothic*, where the individual is subsumed to the familial identity, linked by the evil fungus that Howard Doyle wields. The book's gothic topoi, in a setting of 1950s Mexico, critique colonialism, adding the language of eugenics and racist essentialism espoused by the novel's villains to gothic generic conventions. Moreno-Garcia's postcolonial gothic and perverse Eucharist comment on the legacy of colonialism and permit her dual heroines to fight its monstrosities.

[4] Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. ix and p. xii.
[5] Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 8.
[6] Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 20.

Part of Moreno-Garcia's gothic contribution is the centring of collaborative female characters. As Hirst points out, broadly accepted definitions of gothic romance tend to erase the nuances of female relationships.[7] Moreno-Garcia's novel resists a tendency within the genre to pit women against each other. *Mexican Gothic*'s dual heroines, cousins Noemí and Catalina, are not really romantic rivals; they support and care for each other in a way that pushes against critical definitions that insist female characters must exist in opposition to one another. Even minor female characters Ruth and Agnes, embedded in the horrific history of the house, are not reduced to rivals for male attention. Instead, their spirits collaborate with the living women. Whereas the colonising Doyles subject women to all sorts of abuses like forced marriage, incest, and assault, Noemí protects Catalina, and the two work together (and with the spirits of Doyle women, colonisers once themselves during their lives) to overcome their oppression. Religious structures have a reputation for suppressing the voices of women, and even in the context of the novel, the Doyles' evil rituals have silenced Agnes, whose mind hosts the evil fungus, and Ruth, whose haunting guides Noemí. However, since *Mexican Gothic*'s women do not compete with but support each other, even across time, interpreting the novel need not be confined to examining Noemí and Catalina's relationships with the Doyle men. Even though the novel's conclusion hints at a future relationship between Noemí and Francis, this potential romance seems far less important than the kinship shared by the novel's female characters.

Furthermore, I argue Moreno-Garcia's intersectional feminist approach to the gothic enables elements of her postcolonial critique. Of course, Moreno-Garcia is not the first to use this genre as a vehicle for wrestling with historic global harms. Clive Bloom observes that North American contemporary gothic frequently uses horror to grapple with the legacies of enslavement and colonialism.[8] The rise of a subgenre, postcolonial gothic, focuses on these concerns specifically. As Bloom notes, since the 1980s, Latin American creators such as Luis Ospina or Guillermo del Toro often engage with aforementioned gothic 'European tropes' as a means of commenting on 'contemporary social issues' or making 'political critiques of dictatorial and exploitative regimes'.[9] However, Latinx use of the genre is complex; as Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz write, 'the Gothic has been considered by some to be a sort of colonial imposition in Latin America, a foreign mode of representation that does not reflect

[7] Hirst, 'The Gothic Romance', p. 360.
[8] Bloom, 'Introduction to the Gothic Handbook Series: Welcome to Hell', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1-27 (p. 9).
[9] Bloom, 'Introduction', p. 18.

regional identities'.[10] The mode itself, then, can be read as a colonising form of storytelling. Despite this, Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz describe the current use of Latin American gothic as a means 'to criticise and denounce local issues pertaining to past and present histories of political, social, and gendered violence'.[11] *Mexican Gothic* responds to all three kinds of violence in creative and rhetorically powerful ways, often using the motif of perverse religion, like the distorted, fungal version of the Eucharist, to specifically expose and condemn colonising forces.

Sarah Ilott writes that postcolonial gothic works like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) 'engag[e] with their source text to critique the underpinning ideologies while appropriating their aesthetics'.[12] These fictions use the frames of the gothic while problematising what lies beneath. *Mexican Gothic* follows this pattern, using the topoi of the gothic, including gothicised religion, while critiquing the colonising forces in Mexico, which the Doyles and their evil religion symbolise. Their faith is neither Catholic nor Christian – it is a distorted parody of Catholicism thrown into distinction by Noemí and Catalina's sincere Catholic faith. The Doyles' pagan religion, like historical Catholicism, has been an agent of colonisation. Although on the surface level, the Doyles' practices, marked with cannibalism, incest, and eugenics, look significantly worse, the novel asks us to consider if they are actually more villainous than European colonisers who distorted religion, albeit in a less gothic fashion, as a colonising tool. Beyond critique, Gina Wisker sees the potential for postcolonial gothic not merely to explore the 'ever-present colonial past' but also to potentially 'reclaim and rewrite the past, revision a lived present and speculate about the future'.[13] Moreno-Garcia's heroines destroy the evils of High Place, burning it to the ground, and despite concerns about Francis' internalised fungus, the novel ends with a limited optimism, a sense that the survivors will heal and move on.

Mexican Gothic also responds to the genre's heritage in its use of religion. The gothic is well known for its anti-Catholic roots. Early gothic, as in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), portrays Catholicism as monstrous, parasitic, and perverse. As Victor Sage shows, the gothic is generally a Protestant-leaning

[10] Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz, 'Latin American Horror', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 31-47 (p. 31).
[11] Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz, 'Latin American Horror', p. 33.
[12] Sarah Ilott, 'Postcolonial Gothic', in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 19-32 (p. 19). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, gives voice to Bertha Mason. *The Piano* shares relationships with Jane Mander's *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920) and *Wuthering Heights*.
[13] Gina Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 105-21 (p. 106).

genre, at least in the nineteenth century, and it frequently engages with contemporaneous 'doctrinal and political' conflicts between Catholic and Protestant groups.[14] Certainly, the genre's relationship to religion is complex, and not all critics see the gothic as anti-Catholic.[15] Nonetheless, as Diane Long Hoeveler writes, '[r]eligion was tightly bound up with political allegiances and, in many ways, choosing a religion was a statement about loyalty'.[16] Throughout long nineteenth-century British gothic, Catholics associated with the European continent are often depicted as strange, perverse, and 'Other', largely due to national, political, and religious identity markers that carried particular resonances for an implicitly Protestant English audience and an English empire. By depicting religious outsiders as monstrous, Protestant audiences could reassert a sense of normativity in not merely their own faith but in their national sense of English religious affiliation. Specifically, as Patrick O'Malley suggests, the nineteenth-century Catholic Church itself was portrayed as vampiric; thus, it is no surprise that contemporaneous vampire fiction is invested in Catholic emblems and symbols.[17] Mid-nineteenth-century gothic romances like *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* continued to centre religion but lack the vehement anti-Catholicism of early gothic, often focusing directly on Protestant forms of faith. The genre became less explicitly invested in Catholicism across the long nineteenth century, notably, as Milbank argues, growing ever more conservative in works like *Dracula*, where the supernatural monster is real and religion itself is gothicised.[18] Gothic religious iconography thus became and remains a staple of the genre, but seldom does gothic fiction present religion as a simple personal declaration of faith. Religion in the gothic instead provides an inroad to broader explorations of socio-cultural issues.

In line with this, *Mexican Gothic* does not see religion as a site for individual choice; instead, religion becomes a locus of group identity, a discourse of power, and a weaponised tool. As George Haggerty observes, within early gothic novels, 'family transgressions are often expressed in religious terms'.[19] In *Mexican Gothic*, too, the crimes of the Doyle family take on

[14] Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (Macmillan, 1988), p. 29.
[15] For instance, Maria Purves resists this reading, as many (primarily non-canonical) early gothic novels depict Catholicism in a positive light. See Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange, and the Popular Novel, 1785-1829* (University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 2.
[16] Diane Long Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780-1880* (University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 22.
[17] Patrick O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 130.
[18] Milbank, *God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance, and Reality in the English Literary Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 305.
[19] George E. Haggerty, 'The Horrors of Catholicism: Religion and Sexuality in Gothic Fiction', in *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives*, ed. by Lowell Gallagher, Frederick S. Roden, and Patricia Juliana Smith (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 33-56 (p. 55).

religious language and iconography. Catholicism's emblems and perversions correlate to identity and allegiance. Howard is treated and referred to as a god by members of his family; he is 'lord and priest and father, and they were all his children and acolytes, blindly obeying him' (p. 248). Those who dissent against Howard's will are punished or killed. The Doyles, though not Catholics, are gothic religious fanatics whose own religion uses mushrooms and unholy rituals to attain immortality. Noemí's flashbacks show her a ritual in which Howard's sister/wife gives birth to a child that is then consumed by the priests and Doyle, who eat the 'flesh of the gods' (p. 217) as the baby is the product of an incestuous relationship, and therefore also of Howard Doyle's own bloodline. Howard has lived various lifetimes by eventually taking over the bodies of his own children. The Doyle blood allows them access to the powers of the fungus, and ingestion clinches the deal. Noemí recognises this as a 'demented cycle. […] Children are but food. Food for a cruel god' (p. 270). The discourse of religious fanaticism is part of what makes the Doyle family so gothic; their faith in and consumption of the fungus binds them together and lodges them within the gothic tradition of religious fanaticism.[20] The novel does not depict Catholicism as Other – after all, the heroines Noemí and Catalina are Catholic. They differ in their degree of devoutness, but their Catholicism is sincere and not intrusive upon their daily lives or the lives of others. Conversely, the Doyles' violent rituals present a distorted version of religious iconography empty of theology or religious practice. The English Doyle family are dangerously Other because of their goals and crimes as colonisers; they are monstrous for their actions rather than their religious affiliation. While, as Bloom points out, much of the gothic's 'Catholic symbolism' has now become cliché rather than meaningful, I suggest here that *Mexican Gothic*'s engagement with distorted Catholic imagery emphasises the damages enacted upon community through religion's role in colonisation.[21] Nowhere is this clearer than in the novel's version of the Eucharist: an evil, powerful fungus.

Although *Mexican Gothic* is not explicitly focused on doctrinal interpretations of the Eucharist, the novel employs Christian iconography throughout. The taking of the Eucharist, also known as communion or the Lord's Supper, is a Christian sacrament.[22] Protestants generally consider the ritual to be symbolic, while some Catholics believe in transubstantiation

[20] Religious fanaticism is a significant recurring motif within long nineteenth-century gothic, from depictions of Catholic villains from Robert Wringhim in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), to the use of St John or Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*, or even the Mormons in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).
[21] Bloom, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[22] Though interlocking, these terms are not synonymous. The Eucharist refers to the sacrament itself or the sacred elements, while communion and the Lord's Supper refer to the ritual partaking of the elements.

or the Real Presence. Christian communion can take different forms but features a few common elements, typically including a prayer or blessing before participants consume consecrated morcels of bread and wine (or grape juice) as a community. These elements symbolising the body and blood of Christ are descended from Christian historical practices, as well as Christ's Last Supper with the apostles. In biblical accounts, Christ breaks bread and shares it with his disciples. Then, he shares a cup of wine with them. In several of the accounts, Jesus tells his disciples to 'do this in remembrance of me'.[23] During communion, Christians are generally supposed to remember and reflect upon Christ's sacrifice and/or their own sins.

Regardless of the details, congregants are linked through their partaking of these elements. Communion is thus important for the community. Bernhard Blankenhorn writes, '[w]hen we celebrate the Eucharist and partake of his body and blood, we are joined ever more closely to the Church, Christ's mystical body'.[24] The sacrament is therefore not merely individual. Blankenhorn considers communion a 'sacrament of friendship' with a variety of purposes that benefit both the individual and the group.[25] Participating in communion should, then, in its ideal embodiment, connect one to a hospitable community, reinforcing and strengthening bonds of unity. In its purer forms, Lauren Winner observes, '[t]he Eucharist thereby makes possible a kind of hospitality. It encapsulates and offers God's gracious hospitality to us, and – because God welcomes not only me, but also my neighbour – makes it possible for me to be hospitable'.[26] However, as she also points out, Christian sacraments are frequently subject to human error and damage. Particularly in the context of communion, she writes, meals 'define and bind communities – but that binding and defining can slip easily toward exclusion, the reification of boundaries, of exploitation. […] Instead of enjoyment, meals can devolve into greed; instead of binding community together, meals can fracture community with envy.'[27] The Eucharist, like any Christian sacrament, can be damaged, and when it is, hospitality and community suffer.

In gothic representations of the Eucharist like that epitomised in *Dracula* or *Mexican Gothic*, the sacrament is not merely damaged, but perverse. The gothic Eucharist has a history

[23] See Mark 14. 22-25, Luke 22. 18-20, and 1 Corinthians 11. 23-25. Ralph McMichael points out that Paul's description in 1 Corinthians is dated as the earliest of these but observes that 'this does not mean that it represents the earliest tradition'. See McMichael, *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2010), p. 11.
[24] Bernhard Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven: An Introduction to the Theology of the Eucharist* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021), p. 1.
[25] Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven*, p. 5.
[26] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (Yale University Press, 2018), p. 39.
[27] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 15.

marked with anti-Catholicism, as Protestants could 'Other' Catholics by calling their communion practices idolatrous, supernatural, or cannibalistic. Beyond this, the consumption of flesh, whether Christ's or a human's, literal or figurative, calls back to the idea of the vampire. As Sage argues, the use of blood in *Dracula* is polyvalent, an 'extended play on various senses' of the term, including 'an imaginative inversion of the Roman Doctrine of the Eucharist'.[28] Even the sharing of Christ's figurative body in the use of the Host to repel the Count is analogous to the literal sharing of blood in Stoker's *Dracula*, for heroes and villains alike. These Eucharistic symbols unite their teams and serve practical purposes: sustenance, control, and even medicine, as in the blood transfusions used to revive Lucy Westenra, who has been bitten by the Count. However, *Dracula* represents the sharing of these elements as horrifying and perverse. Its versions of the bread (body) and wine (blood) reflect deep perversions of the sacrament, whether these distortions are in service of rescuing London from an evil vampire or mechanisms of the evil Antichrist vampire himself. Renfield, who is effectively Dracula's acolyte, repeatedly declares, '[t]he blood is the life!' in an ironic allusion to Deuteronomy 12:23, which forbids the Hebrews from consuming blood.[29] The vampire completely inverts the Eucharist instated and practised by the Church.

The representation of communion in *Dracula* has led some scholars[30] to accuse the novel of anti-Catholicism, while it has led others to read the novel as pro-Catholic,[31] focused on Anglicanism,[32] or as even ecumenical.[33] Madeline Potter encourages critics to look beyond the tensions between the novel's 'Catholic aesthetic' and 'Protestant assumptions', and to delve instead into Stoker's eclectic and inclusive theology.[34] Van Helsing's use of the Host as a weapon, as Jonathan Greenaway notes, would be appalling to Protestants and Catholics alike.[35] Potter points out that this 'indulgence' is unorthodox and 'eccentric', cobbling together both 'orthodox and heterodox theological presuppositions'.[36] Regina Schwartz and Patrick McGrath

[28] Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, p. 51.
[29] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Penguin, 2010), p. 159.
[30] O'Malley, *Catholicism*, p. 130; and Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 191-93.
[31] D. Bruno Starrs, 'Keeping the Faith: Catholicism in *Dracula* and its Adaptations', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, 6 (2004), n. p. <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol6/iss1/3/> [accessed 4 July 2024].
[32] Noelle Bowles argues that the novel is actually much more concerned with Anglican controversies than with the relationship between Protestantism and Catholicism. See Bowles, 'Crucifix, Communion, and Convent: The Real Presence of Anglican Ritualism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*', *Christianity and Literature*, 62.2 (2013), pp. 243-58.
[33] Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, pp. 231-32.
[34] Madeline Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology: Stoker's Theology of the Host', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27.3 (2022), pp. 526-42 (p. 526).
[35] Jonathan Greenaway, *Theology, Horror, and Fiction: A Reading of the Gothic Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 160.
[36] Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology', p. 527.

suggest that the modern Eucharist has shifted 'from ritual to poetry', something that primarily holds deep symbolic, rather than supernatural, meaning.[37] Thus, while the communion elements continue to possess literal significance, they also take on a meaning beyond Christian ritual, especially within the gothic, where religious symbols can become vehicles for cultural exploration and critique. *Mexican Gothic* has deep roots not just in earlier gothic depictions of religion, but specifically in gothicised depictions of the Eucharist, exemplified in *Dracula.* Moreno-Garcia's response to this tradition is similarly interested in religious iconography. Regardless of the medium itself (the bread, the wine, or Moreno-Garcia's mushrooms), these sacraments can be consumed and used in exclusive or exploitative ways that harm communities and pervert hospitality.

In both gothic examples, Eucharistic symbolism heightens a sense of real evil, while serving as a means of creating communities. In *Dracula*, the Catholic Host is directly pitted against Dracula's perverse Eucharistic acts. Lucy's suitors share their own blood with her through blood transfusions, linking them to her and each other. Additionally, the central monster takes blood and bestows it upon some with the intent of creating more vampires in his image. In one of the most chilling scenes, the Count drinks Mina Harker's blood and forces her to reciprocally drink from his chest. Dr Seward recounts how the men open the door to the room where they think Mina and her husband Jonathan are sleeping; they find Jonathan 'in a stupor,' and

> Kneeling on the near edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of his wife. By her side stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. […] With his left hand he held both Mrs Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink.[38]

The Count clearly sees this blood sharing as linking them, using a horrifying version of the language of marriage to taunt Mina. She herself later recalls the attack's sexualised violence and sadism, remembering the Count telling her

> 'you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin; my bountiful wine-press for a while; and shall be later on my companion and my helper. […] you are to be punished for what you have done. You have aided in

[37] Regina M. Schwartz and Patrick J. McGrath, 'Introduction', in *Toward a Sacramental Poetics*, ed. by Schwartz and McGrath (University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), pp. 1-17 (p. 7).
[38] Stoker, *Dracula*, pp. 313-14.

> thwarting me; now you shall come to my call.' […] he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight, and with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow.[39]

The men ward off Dracula using 'the Sacred Wafer' before Mina comes out of her stupor and begins to weep, as she has just been the victim of a terrible assault.[40] While it is clear that this use of the Host to protect someone can be morally justified, the vampire slayers more than overcome their squeamishness toward desecrating the sacred to attain those purposes. Indeed, Lori Branch sees Van Helsing's use of the Host as parallel to Dracula's use of humans, as both actions are 'profoundly impersonal' in their utilisation of the pure (unknowing women or the insane Renfield in Dracula's case; the Host in Van Helsing's) with impure motives (colonising the world, slaying a vampire).[41] Stephen Purcell suggests that the novel's pragmatic use of Catholic imagery, from the vampire-repelling function of the rosary to the Host's protective powers, reflects characters' willingness to weaponise religious elements for 'immoral purposes'.[42] They violate the holy, be it the Host or the body of a former beloved, in the service of greater ends, something Moreno-Garcia's Doyle family similarly embraces in their desecrations of religious iconography, pagan practices, and human life. *Dracula,* therefore, provides a template for Moreno-Garcia's depiction of religious iconography, concentrated in the motif of the perverse Eucharist, as a tool of colonial power. Greenaway concurs that in *Dracula*, 'theology can all too easily be used to provide a discursive framework for violence and domination'.[43] The men employ the Host as a weapon in service to an essentially colonialist system, protecting their country (and women) from the foreigner working to colonise it. Violence and religion continually mingle in the novel, and while we expect this from the evil vampire, the men are not innocent of these crimes. They may not be as blatantly evil, but they, too, succumb to acting violently. The Count's attack on Mina parallels rape, as many critics have observed, as does Lucy's violent slaying by the men. The sharing of blood therefore creates – and damages – communities.

A scene in *Mexican Gothic* parallels Dracula's assault upon Mina. Howard Doyle wants Noemí to become part of the family, planning to inhabit Francis' body after forcing Noemí into

[39] Stoker, p. 320.
[40] Stoker, p. 314.
[41] Lori Branch, '*Dracula*'s Sacramental Prosaics and the Remains of Religion in Modernity', in Schwartz and McGrath, pp. 237-58 (pp. 243-44).
[42] Stephen Purcell, 'Not Wholly Communion: Skepticism and the Instrumentalization of Religion in Stoker's *Dracula*', *Christianity and Literature*, 67.2 (2018), pp. 294-311 (p. 296), doi:10.1177/0148333117708257.
[43] Greenaway, *Theology, Horror, and Fiction*, p. 165.

marrying him. Before reaching this point, however, Howard makes her ingest the fungus to link her more tightly to the house and the Doyles. Although she has been consuming it passively (and initially unwittingly) through the air and through her food, the fungal instrument of control running through Howard's veins becomes an active, violent weapon with the power to prevent Noemí from leaving High Place. Noemí is forced to kneel beside Howard, who is lying ill in bed. She tries to escape, but Virgil pushes her down. Howard forces her to kiss him, smiling eerily and 'showing off his stained teeth – stained with black', before pressing 'his lips against hers. Noemí felt his tongue in her mouth and then saliva burning down her throat as he pressed himself against her and Virgil propped her in place' (p. 204). Later, Howard opens one of his own blisters and pours that liquid into a cup he wants Noemí to drink from.

This dark, forced sharing mirrors that enacted upon Mina Harker. For vampires and the Doyles alike, consent is completely disregarded, both in terms of physical boundaries and in terms of community affiliation, which is forced through shared substances like blood or the fungus. Sexual deviance and religious deviance are certainly entwined in this book, a connection that can be interpreted as riffing on earlier gothic, wherein, as O'Malley has shown, religious and sexual deviance are depicted as intertwining within Catholicism.[44] Even the forced marriage ceremony between Noemí and Francis parallels a perverse communion that echoes Stoker's perverse communions in *Dracula.* The family repeats a Latin ceremony in 'choreographed obeisance to the father', and instead of partaking of the bread of communion, Noemí and Francis share in 'two tiny, dried pieces of yellow mushrooms' (p. 257). Noemí herself recognises this as 'a strange parody of the communion wafer' (p. 257). The ceremony reiterates the fanatical religion that the Doyle family practices, in which Howard is god, immortality is the goal, and fungal mushrooms that feed off a sacrificed maternal figure invert the idea of Christ's body given as a willing and kenotic sacrifice for all, as Agnes' body is forcibly taken for Howard. In a sense, this looks like an extreme, perverted form of Catholicism that distorts religious iconography to maintain power and control over the bodies of women and the spaces the Doyles have colonised.

Dracula's gothicised religious symbolism is therefore taken up in *Mexican Gothic*, wherein the colonising Doyles are bound through a mysterious fungus framed through the lens of Catholicism. Though treated as holy by the family, the mushrooms can be read as a vehicle desecrated to serve their violent, greedy ends. The Doyles' religion deifies Howard and justifies the family's violent, genocidal actions, from cannibalism and incest to eugenics and murder.

[44] O'Malley, *Catholicism*, p. 18.

For Dracula, blood sharing becomes a perverse version of communion that gives Mina a hypnotic mental connection to the vampire. Similarly, substance sharing in *Mexican Gothic* mentally connects the inhabitants of High Place. Noemí's mind, like Mina's, is invaded because of the 'gloom', a haunting of High Place orchestrated through a fungal network; this gives Virgil some access to her private thoughts, and he seems able to impose thoughts upon her. Francis explains that the fungus connects all of them in a 'web' that has the power to 'preserve memories' and 'thoughts' (p. 211). Noemí, who receives important messages from the spirits of Agnes and Ruth, seems particularly able to connect with these memories, a trait which Doyle sees as stemming from her ethnic identity, and which he believes makes her an ideal candidate for forced marriage into the family. This form of community lacks hospitality or welcome; it is imprisonment for Noemí and Catalina, who, in their identities as Mexican women with indigenous blood, are seen by the Doyle men as mere commodities. Like the silver mined decades ago, Howard sees these women as conquests he can possess and destroy. However, the same fungus that enables Howard's horrible reign empowers the women to communicate across generations, as they work to ultimately destroy both him and the fungus itself.

Furthermore, colonisation provides a central concern for both novels. *Dracula*, often read as deeply anxious about the decline of the British empire, fits among a cluster of late nineteenth-century works that Steven Arata reads as invested in 'reverse colonisation', in which 'the coloniser finds himself in the position of the colonised, the exploiter is exploited, the victimiser victimised'.[45] Part of the vampire's threat is his desire to colonise England through creating more vampires, a plan he prepares for by shipping boxes of Transylvanian earth to his London homes. Similarly, Howard Doyle 'brought earth from England to ensure the conditions here would be like the ones in our motherland', soil that would host not merely the English garden but the fungus that would enable their colonial success (p. 237). Moreno-Garcia thus adapts and inverts the imperial-gothic tradition. While *Dracula* recounts the story of British heroes protecting their homeland from the reverse colonisation of an evil vampire, *Mexican Gothic* centres a haunted mansion that can only by exorcised by indigenous women who can defeat Mexico's colonisers. Instead of reversing the colonisation by colonising the oppressors, the novel works to reverse colonisation itself by undoing it. The Doyles are not themselves colonised; they, their family home, and their way of life are destroyed. Moreno-Garcia's novel's toppling of the coloniser is painted as victorious, rather than anxiety-producing. This includes the destruction of the fungus.

[45] Steven Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 108.

As I have been arguing, in Moreno-Garcia's world, the fungus serves as Eucharistic medium, binding and sustaining the Doyle family, holding memories, and providing their perverse religion a sacred symbol. Soon after her arrival, Noemí takes a walk in the Doyle family cemetery, where she finds actual mushrooms. There, Francis introduces her to the native fungi and tells her about the 'connection between certain cultures and mushrooms' (p. 98). Noemí is already familiar with the local variety, called 'Teonanácatl', also known as '[t]he flesh of the gods' (p. 98). She recalls her indigenous grandmother's cultural practice, telling Francis that 'the Mazatec ingest similar mushrooms during certain ceremonies. It's not about lust, it's *communion*' (p. 99, emphasis added). Although her comment about lust stems from a previous attempt at flirtatious banter, Christian discourses about communion become the framework through which Noemí reads and explains historic mushroom use. She understands this practice as descendent from older, non-Christian practice, but she uses Christian language to describe it, here and throughout the novel. Francis does this as well, later telling her that the Doyle family's '[c]asual cannibalism' is also a 'communion. Our children are born infected with the fungus, and ingesting their flesh means ingesting the fungus; ingesting the fungus makes us stronger and in turn it binds us more closely to the gloom. Binds us to Howard' (p. 281). It is partaken of formally, but it also pervades the air at High Place, and his mother Florence contaminates their food with the fungus. This perverse Eucharist binds the group together, just as Dracula's blood does with the women he infects, or as the sacrament binds together the members of a church. Potter's reading of *Dracula*'s theology as inflected with the bizarre and not easily explicable can be applied to Moreno-Garcia's novel as well, since the book's use of religion eschews clear-cut explanations and interpretations.[46] Noemí and Catalina are Catholic, but the Doyles' religion blends pagan and Catholic iconography with the symbol of the ouroboros and horrifying rituals involving incest, murder, and cannibalism. Their religion is clearly fictive, but it pulls from gothic religious concepts. *Mexican Gothic* participates in the long nineteenth-century gothic tradition of distorting and questioning the sacred to dramatic and critical effect, and it contributes to postcolonial gothic's goal of exposing the damaging powers and consequences of colonialism.

The novel's gothic reinterpretations riff on established gothic templates while building upon the traditions of perverse Eucharists and damaged communities. The language of communion is repeatedly invoked in *Mexican Gothic*, highlighting the quasi-religious centrality of the Eucharistic fungus. The Doyles can connect to the fungus as the family blood

[46] Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology', p. 529.

is 'special. The fungus bonds with us, it's not noxious. It can even make us immortal' (p. 212). This fungus binds the community of believers who ingest it. Further, it bestows gifts: eternal life on Howard Doyle, and communion with the house for others. It gives Noemí the ability to understand the house through memory flashbacks that ultimately enable her to uncover the Doyles' secrets and escape. The fungus also binds individuals to the house; they get sick if they leave without having partaken of an antidote tincture. In this, the perverse Eucharist distorts hospitality. Rather than coming from a table where all are welcome to feast, this fungus ensures that none can leave. Furthermore, the fungus' impact on the Mexican miners who succumb and die because of it is the opposite of hospitality. Rather than offering protection and community to all, the Doyles' communion creates extreme exclusion and enacts violence. Doyle considers the miners to be 'mulch' and lets the fungus destroy them (p. 212). The family goes beyond perversely killing their own children and harms the community they have colonised. Although the fungus has ambiguous origins, the Doyles impose it upon the land around High Place as part of their invasion. Significantly, local healer Marta Duval brews a tincture that serves as an antidote for the evil fungus. In this way, the duelling natural forces continue to underscore the novel's critique of colonialism.

The Doyles' evil fungus is fuelled by the sacrificed body of Howard's late wife and sister, Agnes, hidden in a tomb. In this construction, she becomes both a Mary figure and a Christ figure as she gives birth to and sustains these Eucharistic mushrooms. Howard acknowledges that '[h]er spirit lives on in High Place' (p. 75). His statement is not merely figurative; Agnes' spirit saturates and haunts the house. When they find her corpse, Noemí sees in it

> 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. The clothing in which she had been buried had long dissolved into dust, and instead 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. (p. 282)

Agnes becomes a perverse and victimised Mary holding the house together, the central figure that serves as the glue for this depraved familial religion. Agnes is therefore the Real Presence in High Place, the physical manifestation of a sacrifice that provides a twisted life to the community. Importantly, Noemí reads Agnes' corpse as a religious emblem in a Catholic cathedral, viewing her through a framework of religious iconography, one that serves as an interpretive lens, object for critique, and locus of fear in the novel. Agnes gives birth not to a

child but to the horrific haunting of the house, known as 'the gloom', the matrix of fungal memories, minds, and spirits that reside at High Place. In a strange un-dead state, Agnes hosts and sustains the fungus, the body of a white woman invading Mexican soil against her will so that Howard Doyle can live forever, conquering and harming whomever he pleases. Through Agnes, Ruth's hauntings and memory, Catalina, and Noemí, Moreno-Garcia's novel specifically addresses the impact of colonisation and violence on women, who could not receive the primary evil gift bestowed by the fungus. Instead, they adapt it into a means of communication as they work to resist.

The fungus is thus a Eucharistic *and* vampiric medium that facilitates eternal life for some and murders others, heightening Moreno-Garcia's postcolonial critique. Some must die for some to live; this is the only way the fungus as a medium can truly flourish. Without the bodies of Agnes (and the murdered children) or the bodies of the dead miners, the colonising Howard Doyle could never have obtained such power. Noemí sees in one of the house's haunted memories that his immortality originated in a cannibalistic religious ceremony where a fungus provided eternal life. Howard, in his actual youth, killed the priest of the life-giving mushroom cult and became 'holy', as he killed the original members of the order and began his demented quest to perfect the ceremony through inbreeding, murder, and infant cannibalism, warping and expropriating an existing indigenous religion for his own healing, self-aggrandisement, and profit (p. 207). The Doyles do not feed the community: they consume it. Colonisation is, in this novel, the inverse of hospitality. Deeply embedded in the gothic tradition, Catholicism operates both as a colonising religion and a colonising framework in *Mexican Gothic*. The Doyles are obviously colonisers, and the fungal medium of High Place is also a colonial imposition. As Noemí's education has brought her to learn, mushrooms are part of indigenous religious practices that extend beyond Central America. The novel's golden mushrooms, through this gothic Eucharist, become incorporated and interpreted through the frame of Catholicism. Through reproducing and offering her own spin on these Catholic emblems, Moreno-Garcia critiques the colonisation that Catholicism helped enact, particularly in Latin America. This simultaneous use and critique construct a complex interpretive matrix and a fruitful ambiguity within the novel, especially as the Doyles themselves, the novel's active and violent colonisers, do not practise Catholicism. Conversely, Noemí and Catalina's Catholicism offers them comfort, rather than harm, despite not being an indigenous Mexican religion. While Noemí seems indifferent to her own Catholicism at the outset of the novel, she does pray to 'a little figurine of San Judas Tadeo' over Francis' bedside once they have escaped (p. 294). Hence, it seems Catholicism itself is not inherently the subject of critique. In presenting both perverse

and nominally helpful religion, Moreno-Garcia avoids early gothic anti-Catholicism and shifts the focus to the damages enacted by colonisers who use religion as a weapon.

Nevertheless, the Doyles continually twist religious concepts surrounding the Catholic Eucharist. Catholic frames reveal the true horrors of the Doyle family, whose perverse religious practices allow them to kill and colonise without remorse. Prior to their arrival in Mexico, invasive Catholicism had already built strong colonial roots. Therefore, the Doyles invaded not just Mexico but also Catholicism, rendering the land, its people, and its religious practices into something truly horrifying and evil. Their motto, inscribed on Agnes' tomb and elsewhere, is 'Et Verbum caro factum est', Latin for 'and the word became flesh'. This direct quotation from John 1 (in reference to the incarnation of Christ) is part of a longer phrase: 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.'[47] Noemí hears this refrain coming from the family insignia, the ouroboros, the snake eating its tail. As the Doyles do not practice a recognisable form of Christianity, it initially seems odd that they would incorporate this well-known biblical passage into their family motto. Partly, their misuse of religious language heightens the novel's overall sense of and engagement with horror, much as Van Helsing's misuse of the Host sharpens the horrific necessities that the vampire slayers are compelled to take on in *Dracula*. Additionally, however, this passage's use of light imagery in the context of Christ underlines Moreno-Garcia's distortion of religious language, framing, and imagery.

The dark secret of the Doyles' eternal life lies in the sacrifice of a woman, Agnes, whose corpse, frozen in time, haunts the place and sustains the immortalising power of the bioluminescent fungus that Howard Doyle wields as an instrument of power and longevity. This eerie version of the Christian Eucharist, which depicts an imported fictional European religion as evil, underscores the postcolonial critique. While Noemí is a nominal Catholic and Catalina is devout, the Doyles' own eugenicist, genocidal religion stands in stark contradistinction to the colonising work of Catholicism in Mexico, even as the Doyle family's crimes are grounded in racism and colonial imposition. This juxtaposition leads to no simple or easy answers, but it is clear that the source of light at High Place is not holy. It is deliberately, when read through religious frames, perverse. Light imagery is also used around Noemí, however, as she becomes a figurative light shining among the Doyles as well as a literal one, symbolised in her 'lucky talisman', a small cigarette lighter (p. 296).[48] Her smoking habit leads

[47] John 1. 14, *King James Bible*.
[48] 'Let there be light' is one of her many quips (Moreno-Garcia, p. 121).

her to carry this lighter, provoking Florence's disapproval as fire could potentially harm the fungus, which dislikes light and finds cigarette smoke irritating. Eventually, it is used to light the lamp Noemí employs to burn down the haunted house and its vampiric mushrooms. As Francis recalls, revealing some degree of Catholic education, fire is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, something which Noemí forgets. He declares that it 'transforms whatever it touches,' a description not just religious in nature (p. 109). The light of the fungus became a medium that negatively and harmfully transformed Mexican land and those unfortunate enough to serve the Doyles, but so, too, can Noemí's light transform High Place by burning it down. In her hands, this light becomes a form of rebellion against oppression.

As this essay has argued, *Mexican Gothic* specifically uses gothic tropes like the perverse Eucharist to engage in postcolonial critique. Wisker asserts that '[c]olonialism and imperialism are also vampiric, leaving victims as drained husks, dead or forever in servitude'.[49] In *Mexican Gothic*, Howard Doyle's late wife and sister Agnes is literally this husk, her decaying body imprisoned to forever sustain the system until Noemí burns it all down, symbolically taking agency over the colonising, draining forces that the Doyles represent. As Wisker continues, postcolonial gothic works 'to revalue and restore worldviews, languages, customs, practices, religions' that 'invaders found other and so threatening'; it 'otherises the invaders, exposes their destruction, their illegitimate reconfiguration of the lives of others'.[50] The Doyles are the monsters in this novel, the white Others revealed as villainous, genocidal, incestuous, and cannibalistic. *Mexican Gothic* asks readers to confront the reality of colonisation in Mexico, showing the horrific genocide and cannibalism of the Doyles to be one step away from the actual colonisation of the land and deaths of indigenous peoples like those in Noemí's ancestry. Moreno-Garcia paints a gothic romance where Latin American heroines unseat the patriarchal colonisers, destroying their legacy and the haunted house that sustains it.

The perversions of religious symbols and rites in *Mexican Gothic* are deeply gothic descendants of the nineteenth-century tradition. Moreno-Garcia depicts the perverse Eucharist, the Doyles' fungus, as a dark and dangerous binding agent for a community where religion has gone badly astray. Depictions of twisted sacraments can terrify and compel audiences, especially those who participate in these religious rituals, asking them to reflect upon their own religious practices and the communities they are bound to. Dark Eucharists demonstrate the violent consequences of perverting hospitality. In *Mexican Gothic*, colonialism is presented as

[49] Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', p. 107.
[50] Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', p. 108.

the antithesis of hospitality. Only brave women, working together in communities that resist distorted religion, can oppose colonisation and the damage it causes.