

Big Read Podcast: “Colonial Pasts, Postcolonial Presents”

[upbeat instrumental music fades in]

ALEX ANDERSON: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the first episode of the 2022 Big Read podcast series. I'm Alex Anderson, and I'm thrilled to be the Assistant Director of this year's programming. Today, I'm joined by three spectacular guests, Débora Borba, Jehu Laniog and Marybeth Perdomo. Today's episode is entitled “Colonial Pasts, Postcolonial Presents,” and we'll be discussing how colonialism and postcolonialism function within Silvia Moreno-Garcia's novel *Mexican Gothic*. First, I'm going to ask our guests to introduce themselves, and then we'll get started with our conversation. Débora, would you like to get us started with introductions?

DÉBORA BORBA: Sure, thank you very much. I am a PhD candidate at the School of Language and Cultures. I hold two masters, one from Brazil and one from Purdue University, both in literature. I taught literature courses as well as Portuguese and Spanish as a foreign language in Colombia and in the United States. My academic interests are feminism and literature, gender and genre, multiculturalism, and postcolonial studies. Recently, as a plus of all my academic activities, I am holding Instagram live during the weekends called Bate Papo Literario (@bate_papo.literario), and it is a conversation that I have every weekend—every Sunday, specifically—with someone about a specific novel or short story or lyric of a song and always discussing how the topic is related to literature and society.

ALEX: Wow, that's so exciting! Thank you for sharing that with us. Jehu, would you like to introduce yourself?

JEHU LANIOG: Yes, I'm Jehu, I'm a graduate student at the Department of Anthropology. My research interest is so broad, but currently I'm focusing on agricultural developments in the hometown and the Philippines. So, what I usually do is anthropology of the hometown, which explores anthropology on a smaller scale, as compared to, like, grander anthropologies of, like, a specific, huge cultures—like, for example a different set of people, but I focus more on hometown studies.

ALEX: Very cool. There's a lot of specificity about hometowns and specific places in *Mexican Gothic*, so I'm sure some of that piqued your interest as well.

JEHU: So much [Alex laughs]—yes, I have a lot to say about it.

ALEX: Oh, good, well, that's what we like to hear. And last, but certainly not least: Marybeth, go ahead and introduce yourself.

MARYBETH PERDOMO: Hello! My name is Marybeth Perdomo, and I am a PhD candidate in the English Department here at Purdue University. I'm part of the LTC program (which stands for Literature, Theory, and Cultural Studies), and I am a medievalist [laughs], so I rarely read American literature if I don't have to. So [laughs], so, yeah, so this is very much outside of my wheelhouse. But I mainly do Arthurian literature—women in medieval romances, Middle English, specifically. So, if you ever want to pontificate on medieval romances, I am the girl to go to. But otherwise this is very much a new realm for me, and as I'm teaching this book in my class right now, I'm learning so much about American literature and the Gothic genre as a whole, so it's been a ride. But, yeah, thank you for having me, Alex.

ALEX: Of course, I'm thrilled to have all three of you aboard. And listen, Marybeth, there's some overlap between the medieval romance and the Gothic romance. They are not so far as we might like to think at times.

[ambient chime transition]

ALEX: In order for our guests to have the most free-flowing conversation possible, we're going to get into some spoilers. So, if you have not finished the novel, this is your official spoiler warning. This year's Big Read kick-off event is a wonderful lecture and Q and A from Dr. Jessica Mercado, entitled “Five Things to Know About *Mexican Gothic*.” Additionally, Professor Cara Kinnally will be giving a talk entitled “Setting the Scene in *Mexican Gothic*: Society, Culture, and Politics of Early Twentieth-Century Mexico.” Both of these talks revolve around the various contexts surrounding Moreno-Garcia's work. So, with this interest in context in mind, what exactly are the social, political, and cultural contexts of *Mexican Gothic*? And, perhaps more importantly, how do we see those factors contributing to the text writ large?

MARYBETH: My students actually brought something up to me this week that I didn't think about, and it's how Noemí, the main character, comes from a privileged background, right—as a, you know, wealthy woman—and how she is also very skilled at navigating conversations between characters, particularly with the Doyles. You

see her in the book mentioning often about how—at one point she says, “I know what it's like to deal with irritating men,” [laughs] and so she has he was like all these, like, social skills in this little toolbox that she carries with her, that she brings to the Doyle house, and you see her implementing them. And it seems that the author loves to give her a challenge in the character of Virgil, who sort of seems to meet her match for match. And it was just a very enlightening conversation about how women navigate conversations with men and in new environments.

DÉBORA: Yeah, it caught my attention because, usually, we have the component of postcolonial spaces where the strength that represents the colonizer is very higher than the colonized. And here we have the opponent or the strengths that they are representing are almost equivalent. So, I think we have a component of gender that's very strong—and will be discussed in the future—but when you think about how prepared Noemí is to talk with the Doyles, she is very well prepared. Not just as a person, but as an academic as well, because she studies anthropology. So, she read the same articles that he did. She can argue about that, and she can make counterpoints about what he is presenting to her.

ALEX: Marybeth and Débora, you both bring up an interesting point, because I hear both of you are interested in Noemí's kind of social context—that midcentury, Mexican, in her early twenties in the novel, she's a socialite, definitely. And I think so often in historical fiction, women's social education—just like you're saying, Débora—is sometimes seen as lesser than other different kinds of education. But I think the novel and Noemí's character, specifically, challenges that supposition, because Noemí is not only socially adept and, like Marybeth is saying, having to navigate these incredibly uncomfortable and, at times, absurd conversations with irritating men like Virgil and Howard, but she she learns to prevail and hold her own. And, at times, it's almost like a cat-and-mouse game for her—especially when she's speaking to Francis, you know? She's, kind of—she's aware of the fact that she's flirting with him, and Francis is not always aware that Noemí is flirting with him. So, those are definitely some moments where we could see the social context coming through.

MARYBETH: Well, Débora reminded me of this interaction she had with Florence, right, with this idea of, like, the colonizer and the colonized and the power dynamics between the two. Because, you know, when Noemí meets Florence, Florence lays down the law as, “These are the rules of the house: These are who you are allowed to interact with, and who you are, you know, what rooms you're allowed to go into.” And, so, it was a very interesting moment for Noemí at that time to learn Florence's

rules in this house.

ALEX: The domestic context is also incredibly important to *Mexican Gothic*, especially since, Moreno-Garcia is playing with that—at times—with that haunted house trope but definitely with the kind of “mad woman in the attic” trope as well.

JEHU: A couple of moments in the novel talks about the [Mexican] Revolution, and how they are transitioning, or has transitioned, after the revolution. So one key aspect that I found in the novel is the moments where a focus on silver and the mining has randomly popped up in the novel and how colonialism, technically is extraction. Like, they extract a lot of things, and the image of having silver in the house—in a very disturbing, haunted house—and how they are living in a wealthy, wealthy household, while those people living outside of it has this—has this, somehow, notion of a collective memory of the past about death, and how, somehow, it's unexplained how they died—like, the miners died—and how separate the miners are from the family. But, at the same time, they are connected because the death comes from the family because of what they are doing and what they are using. And, thinking about silver. It's also one thing—like, for example, in the Philippines—they would, the Spaniards got into the Philippines because of, aside from spices, they're also looking for gold. So, it also connects to other—the grand, the grand notion of colonialism, where it is really extraction, and how the family somehow creates a narrative of how important the mine is (because they want to revive it again). But there is also, like, a counter-narrative of why they shouldn't do it. And I'm just astonished how, even though the setting is in Mexico, I can also apply it to a postcolonial nation, such as the Philippines, and how families really, really have a grasp on the political and cultural aspect of the country. So, yeah, it's just astounding—like, the dimension on the use of silver opens up a lot of things in in the aspect of colonialism, and how they are grappling with different outcomes of colonialism. Even medicine, for example, is changing—how they use medicine. With tuberculosis, for example—in the 1950s, of course, tuberculosis is a new thing during that time, and there's not a specific cure for it, so the marker of, like, tuberculosis and how they are suffering is also a good time indicator for the novel.

MARYBETH: It's interesting, right, that you're talking about the land and expectation, 'cause that's actually another conversation I've been having with my students. And I actually did some cursory research into the Mexican Revolution. And it was interesting what I found. You know, prior to the Revolution, there was a president who was a borderline dictator. His name is Díaz, and he actually courted European aristocrats to come to Mexico and to take up land. And a lot of the

indigenous people, the natives, were essentially these penniless workers that worked on these lands that, you know, they were native to. And so, it's, you know, so that's what we're seeing, right, with the Doyle family is, like, they have all these workers, and then the way that these workers are treated, right. Like, at first it's like, "Oh, yeah, they were sent home after they died," but then it got too expensive so they just dug up a pit and just threw their bodies in there. And it's like [laughs], you know, any—any, you know, and especially in a very, you know, Catholic-heavy area like Mexico, it must be so daunting to know that you don't have a resting place for your loved ones because this European family just didn't find it important enough to send them back. So I think it's interesting how the lives of the miners are sort of treated in the very transactionary-like method, right? So, I agree with a lot of what you're saying.

DÉBORA: Yeah, I'd like to add that she uses the Mexican Revolution, and it's not necessary to have a lot of knowledge about that to understand how conflicted it was. It is, like, the foreign people taking advantage of internal conflicts and, multiple times, internal conflicts being created because of the colonial process and the international interests on that land. And they use all of this as a very good space to take advantage and to exploit even more the poor people on that places. And despite each country having a particular and peculiar narrative about the colonial process, we can see very similar moments and actions. So what happened in Mexico is similar to what happened in the Philippines to what happened in Brazil. So we have different colonizers, but the process is very similar. And about what Marybeth just mentioned—the miners and the workers. It reminds me of one part of the narrative, one paragraph, that I really love because, for me, it summarizes a lot of this colonial discussion that we can have. It is on page 269, and it says: "A body. That's what they all were to them. The bodies of the miners in the cemetery, the bodies of women who gave birth to their children, and the bodies of those children who are simply the fresh skin of the snake. And there on the bed lay the body that mattered. The father." So, I think this citation is great to synthesize all of this colonial process, even with the element of the father as the patriarch and reminds us that patriarchalism is part of the imperialism and all the colonial process.

ALEX: I think all of your comments are kind of speaking to the fact that there is clear socio-historical context of the novel. But, like what Débora is saying, readers and students don't necessarily need to know every detail about the Mexican Revolution to be able to understand the colonial and postcolonial themes throughout the text, right? We can clearly see, just like in that passage that Débora was pointing to, the importance of patriarchal figures and the patriarchy writ large

and how those elements function within postcolonial contacts—just in one paragraph.

[ambient chime transition]

ALEX: I'm wondering if we can perhaps provide some working definitions. For listeners who are perhaps less familiar with colonial and/or postcolonial literature, how would you define or describe colonialism or colonial powers? It's a big question. And, additionally, how, as a reader or as a scholar, do you identify colonial forces in postcolonial texts, such as *Mexican Gothic*?

MARYBETH: One thing that stood out to me when I first started reading this book was at the beginning when Noemí comes to the house, and she is told, “We speak English here, and Spanish is not allowed.” And I think that that has a lot to do with colonial powers ensuring, you know, they define what is permissible and what's not permissible in a given space. So in the house Noemí is not allowed to speak her language that she's comfortable with. So having sort of that power over her, I think it's part of it. I'm really not sure how to define that.

DÉBORA: There are different ways to read colonialism, but the main idea—and there is more agreement around it—is when the European empires started to navigate to the “New World” and to colonize this world. So we can think about 1492 as the beginning of this process, and then we have different nations in Europe that colonized different countries in the New World—in Africa, North America, Central America, South America, and Asia. So this process of taking those places and imposing, then, the dominance and the culture and the language and everything else is part of this process of colonization. But it's not so simple because to be able to be over a culture, over a people, it's necessary a complete process of dominance where someone is better, and someone is not good. So, this is the process, and it's used a lot in colonial studies: the binary pairs. So we have black and white. We have civilized and uncivilized. We have good and bad. We have male and female. We have a lot of different pairs, and they were very useful in the process of colonization. So one language is good and another one, no. And the only privilege—and it's a construction, as well, used by the colonizers—is that they were starting a process of modernization. So they had the ships to navigate, they had the instruments to navigate and to go to different, new continents, and they had a little more power by the guns that they were using. But it did not mean that they were better. They just took advantage of these instruments to dominate the people. But to identify criteria of colonization and aspects of colonization in the world and in literature—it's very

easy. Because the process of colonization was so strong, and it worked so well for more than five hundred years, that we can see it in almost everything. So maybe every piece of literature can have one or two elements to discuss colonialism in it.

ALEX: Thank you, Those are some really extraordinary insights. And I think your comment really illuminates just how far-reaching and insidious the technologies of colonialism and neocolonialism can be. Thank you—what a great gloss. I feel like that's going to be so useful.

MARYBETH: We should definitely talk about that first dinner conversation with Noemí and Howard and, you know, how he comes right out of the gate and asks her, “What are your thoughts on the superior and inferior races?” And it's like, “I'm just trying to have soup.”

DÉBORA: Yeah, it's a great point because when I was rereading the novel to find the specifics on colonialism and postcolonialism there, I saw first the conversation that Noemí had with Francis, and he said, “Oh, in our place we just speak English. I hope you can speak English.” And it was great for her because she was educated in English and she took classes since she was six, and we can read it as a colonial or postcolonial thing—but maybe not. So it passes. But when we have that first dinner, and Howard starts this conversation—his first comment is, “You are darker than Catalina, than your cousin.” I thought, “This is the beginning of the tragedy.”
[laughs]

MARYBETH: Yes! Because colorism is still prevalent, especially in Latin America and Caribbean islands. And so, it's—I was already starting to get uncomfortable and shifty.

ALEX: Yeah, I think in that moment Moreno-Garcia is kind of testing the limits of her readers, too. I feel like she dangles preliminary comments about, like, “Well, maybe we should give this character the benefit of the doubt.” Like, “Maybe I'm reading too much into that. Maybe they didn't mean it that way.” And then Howard comes out with the, “You know, you're a little darker than your cousin,” and it's, like, “Yep, I was right—that's exactly what that is.” But, again, I think that's, like, a demonstration of how sneaky and how insidious those powers can be and how it slips in through things like language and control and domestic space and extraction—all of these great things that you all are bringing up.

MARYBETH: It seems like Howard just has no care whether or not this makes her

uncomfortable. He wants to have this conversation. He wants her ideas about, you know—on page thirty, he mentions this idea of, like, a “cosmic race” of all “bronze people,” which—I’m not really sure what that’s about, and I don’t think I want to know. [laughs] But a lot of it was just, you know, it’s him saying like, “I’m trying to push her,” and sort of, like, really just how, you know, put all these ideas out.

ALEX: Yeah, and I think you’ve touched on one of the most prominent colonial technologies in the novel, which is eugenics, and kind of using selective breeding, like the Doyles are interested in, to create this “cosmic race”—to create this “perfect” vision of what they want High Place, because that’s a little slice of their world, like, how they want society to function. They want it to be *their* society; they want it to be—to follow a certain blueprint. They want it to be made up of certain people who look a certain way—just complete erasure of difference.

JEHU: But, going around that idea of erasure and eugenics—it also reflects on how a colonial power would maintain itself in a specific country, for example. It would try to maintain itself for three hundred years, just like the family did, and in the end, they would crumble, inbreeding with each other. And maybe they benefit from it during the first two hundred years, but, over time, the family is having a hard time producing more or transferring to another body because the genetics is crumbling. Like, they *are* crumbling, just like colonialism did in the past two hundred years. It didn’t maintain itself. Even though a colonial power tries to maintain itself, it would reach a breaking point where it can’t maintain itself anymore—where it would maybe sell itself, sell the colony. For example, sell the Philippines. Spain sold the Philippines to the United States because it can’t maintain itself anymore, and they cannot fight the revolution anymore, so they sold the Philippines. And that happened during the novel. Like, I really felt a little bit of joy when I felt that they are slowly crumbling. And, like, the notion of resistance—the idea of using specific substances. Like smoke, for example, or they use a fire. I was like. “Oh, I feel like they’re gonna wage a revolution now, and they’re gonna finish the whole family.” And they did! They triumph—wow! It’s, like—it’s, like, a process of being under a colonial power and then resisting over time because you—you had the courage, you found courage by having different modes of resistance. Which the main character, Noemí, did. She created a plan on how they would do it.

MARYBETH: I definitely agree with you there. I would also say that we’re seeing resistance even *before* Noemí enters the picture with Ruth, right? because yes, the family was hurting. But then when Ruth came and started shooting people—you know, shooting up her own family—that *really* hurt them. And so we’re starting to see

even resistance of colonization, even *within* the sort of, like, ranks of the Doyles, which I thought was such an interesting dynamic, right, where we're seeing this woman who's, like, I'm not gonna be part of this family or, you know, let this family continue on. And Noemí in a lot of ways seems to be picking up where Ruth left off in that way. But, yeah, just like you, I was also really happy when I saw the house burning. [laughs] But also connecting back to what Débora was saying, right, about how insidious and prolonging colonization is, right? It definitely breathes life into Francis's fear about his future and about where he stands, right? Because he's in the hospital, and he has all this concern about, like, "I'm gonna carry this legacy with me." And so what do you do as, you know, someone who's part of that? And so it would be really interesting to get a sequel [laughs] of this novel to see how these characters kind of grapple with that aftermath.

DÉBORA: It's very interesting to mention this end because we don't need to *love* the novel completely—for example, I don't like this end. I don't like this idea of Francis remaining and having this kind of romantic end with Noemí. I don't like it [laughs]; I think it's too cliché. [laughs] Oh—spoiler! But the place itself is called High Place. They are there in this mountain on the top, and the house is big. It's imponent, but it's decaying. It's odd; it's ugly; it's not comfortable. So it, once again, reminds this idea of colonialism, of a period of glory. And then the descent when things are not going well. So it's a strong message for the readers *and* for the process of colonization and how it works. And it has a lot of power—it can cause a lot of damage—but it can be destructed as well. And it can destruct itself internally because it doesn't work, but the elements used to keep this power are not going to work the same way always. So we have the workers—we have people against this process of domination and power that causes such destruction. So we have during the narrative—and it's excellent, I really like how Silvia Moreno-Garcia created this environment where we can select so many elements in the narrative to discuss. But at the same time they are very well-articulated, but they are not defined and closed. Most of them are open to discussion. We can see and check and agree or disagree with them, and I think it's great for us as readers and teachers, the people discussing the novel.

ALEX: Yeah, and there is a kind of a contemporary conversation happening in postcolonial studies now where scholars say, "When we talk about 'postcolonialism,' is that really a truthful word for what we study? For instance, would something like *decolonialism* be more accurate? Because that kind of denotes we're—we're moving away from colonial powers, but can we ever *actually* be rid of them? Like, is the idea of a postcolonial space a utopia in a way?" And I think, yes,

this novel ends with this, you know, purgatorial Gothic fire, and it is perhaps heartwarming and optimistic, and, comforting in some ways to imagine that this ending is kind of a perfect postcolonial ending. However, I think that that picture-perfect ending—that “cliché ending,” right, that Débora is saying—is complicated by the fact that when Noemí and Francis are kind of recovering in the hospital, they have that conversation where Francis says, “Will I ever actually be rid of this thing inside me? Are the spores going to return? Will I one day be harmful to you?” And there is kind of that impossible knowledge of whether or not that's going to come back, and, if it does resurface—how? Is it going to be stronger? Is it going to be nuanced? Is it going to be more dangerous, even? So I wonder if maybe that's one of the things that readers are supposed to think about at the end of this novel.

MARYBETH: I think one of the things it sounds like what's getting at, right, is that colonization takes many different forms. And maybe Francis doesn't have his house or the mushrooms anymore, but who knows what it can transform itself into later on? And how that power comes back. So, yeah, the ending definitely felt unfinished. This feels like the beginning to another story or, you know, something along those lines.

JEHU: But isn't—in a way, for example: If a colonial power would stop or self-destruct itself or would end in a specific country, the story of those people living in the lower part of the village, for example—what are their narratives after the house burned? What would their situation be? Maybe it's an open-ended ending for that reason. Because what would happen? Would they prosper, or would they grapple with a lot of outcomes of the presence of the family for the longest time? Because colonialism—it lingers. Like, postcolonial nations still have problems from colonialism. And that's the interesting part. Like, what would happen in the novel next time? If there's a second part of the novel, where does the perspective come in? What point of view would come into the next novel? Throughout the novel, everything's focused on the house. But there are moments where Noemí would go down, even though there are restrictions, but the narratives of the people—it's really not thoroughly explored. So, if they're thinking about what would happen next...

ALEX: I mean, I want to know more about the people who live in the village in the novel that we have. because we get insights into two characters who live permanently in El Triunfo. So we have, like, those two examples, but we don't really have access to any of the other characters' lives. And part of that is by design—because how could Noemí have access to those people? She is effectively a prisoner of High Place. Anytime she goes down to the village, it is only because

Francis acts as a steward (literally) for her. But I'm wondering, too, if that omission is supposed to strategically prompt readers to wonder about the people who live in El Triunfo, or if we are supposed to interpret that omission as ghosts. Like, is that kind of the unspoken haunting of this novel? Are we supposed to always be picturing High Place with ghosts of the miners in the background? Are we supposed to be picturing grieving families in El Triunfo? I mean, that's just something that I consistently think about when I revisit this text.

MARYBETH: I mean, Dr. Camarillo even mentioned, right, that everyone in that town had been affected in some way by the Doyles. So there's definitely a collective trauma that exists in that town. Even if the Doyles are gone now, El Triunfo will never *really* be the same. Somebody said, right, that a lot of people left the town. So you're sort of seeing one of the effects, I think, of colonization, which is where the land becomes uninhabitable, and so people are forced to migrate—you know, being forced to move to go someplace where you can find resources. And so I think that that's a really good idea of thinking about it as ghosts, because it's, you know, it's becoming a ghost town.

DÉBORA: It's a great point as well. I had a thought about these two locals that appear in the narrative. The doctor and Marta Duval, who's kind of a—she's not a doctor, she's not a medical doctor, but she treats people with some potions and medicines that she prepares. So she represents, like, the indigenous people, maybe. We don't have a discussion about her ethnicity, but probably she represents the native people from Mexico. But even the name of the place—El Triunfo—is ambiguous. Because it can be irony—like, *triumfo* for who or what or when? Because, actually, they all have this trauma, and they all receive the effects of the family, leaving there and exploring that place. But at the same time, after the action of Noemí and Catalina in the house—because we can't forget that *Catalina* took the action; she is who puts the fire—after the action of the end, they have this triumph. So El Triunfo has a proper name, because finally they are free. But it's a great question, like, what is going to happen next? But the focus on the characters—well, it's always an election. Like, the author can't narrate the history of every single character in the story. So elections are made and for an election, there is an exclusion, and, unfortunately, for this narrative to be an authentic Gothic, we can't focus on the people in El Triunfo. It's necessary to focus on the house and what is happening inside that place. So that's a consequence of the style and the selections made by the author. But it's a great question if we think about the process of colonization. What is going to happen next? What's happening after this trauma? And it's a great, this idea of them as ghosts because it's a very proper metaphor and

comparison to be used.

MARYBETH: And I also think it's interesting, too, because we talked earlier about how Noemí goes into town to sort of get away from the Doyles. But—I don't know if you guys have the same ideas that I did when you guys were reading it—it felt like a ghost town, and it felt like a direct result of the Doyles. So even when she's trying to get away from them, she can't, really—at least not there. Their influence, their power is sort of all-consuming. And that's a really big part of colonialism, right, is making sure that the power of the oppressor is always present, and it's always pushing you down. So I think that's a really interesting moment, when Noemí is just trying to go with the town and see the place, and she finds it almost deserted or very few people around.

[ambient chime transition]

ALEX: Well, speaking of the ultimate question: “What happens next?” I'm curious as to what you all think about the closing pages of the novel, and, if I may, I'd like to draw your attention to one passage in particular in the middle of page three hundred. This is when Francis and Noemí are in the hospital. And Noemí says, “‘We'll stay together,’ she said firmly. ‘We'll stay together and you won't be alone, I can promise you that.’” And Francis asks, “‘How can you make such a promise?’ She whispered that the city was wonderful and bright, and there were areas of it where buildings were rising up, fresh and new, places that had been open fields and held no secret histories. There were other cities, too, where the sun could scorch out the land and bring color to his cheeks. They could live by the sea, in a building with large windows and no curtains. ‘Spinning fairy tales,’ Francis murmured, but he embraced her.” And, especially in a conversation about colonialism and postcolonialism, I am so struck by this image of new cities, places that had been open fields and held no secret histories. What are we supposed to make of this idea of spaces and places that hold no secret histories? Is this supposed to imply that as long as the dirty laundry is aired out, as long as we don't let colonialism stay an insidious power, as long as we call it what it is, that it will no longer be threatening? Is that possible? Do places without secret histories exist? Or is this actually a fairy tale that Francis accuses Noemí of spinning?

MARYBETH: This line here is interesting, especially when we think about the Gothic genre, right? Because, you know, what makes it a Gothic genre is all the hidden things, all the hidden secrets in that place. And so it's really interesting how we're seeing the genre of Gothic literature and postcolonialism kind of come together.

But this is definitely, I would say, wishful thinking on Noemí's part of, you know, trying to find some place that is sort of free from this burden of bloodshed and hostilities towards others. And can such a place like that really exist? Is there such a place that is free from harming others, and I don't know of the answer to that. But it does sound like this is Noemí wish, that they find that sort of Eden paradise, if you will.

DÉBORA: For me, it sounds two ways. First, in the narrative, the idea of a utopic place, a paradise, a place where no harm can be done. And if we think about the colonial process and the colonial idea as well, it is, once again, this utopia, a place that's peaceful, a place that's good. But at the same time, it must be constructed because the place does not exist. And she mentioned the idea of different cities. So maybe this idea of search, of migration—and maybe a new place for Francis. Because she is in her land, and she belongs to that place. Who is not belonging, at least naturally—and if you think about the language and the culture and everything—is the Doyle family. They tried to recreate England in Mexico. But she wants to show him all the natural aspects of Mexico. So I think there is different possibilities.

JEHU: And I'm thinking, with the mention of buildings, like, if they're extracting metals in the mines, and they're talking about open fields—like, places that have been open fields. Maybe—you know, when you extract something, you put it in a different place, and you build cities from it. You build buildings. So, in my head, it's also the process of colonialism, where they would extract something, and they would bring it, they would use it in another place.

ALEX: And I wonder, too, if here we're supposed to maybe be generous with Noemí's notion of, like, rebuilding or building anew. And maybe she's also talking about a kind of relationship building. In a positive reading of this ending, maybe this is Noemí offering a kind of sustainable postcolonial model for rebuilding. Maybe it's a relational rebuilding. Maybe it's also an act of forgiveness; I mean, there's certainly a version of this novel that could have ended where Noemí would have absolutely despised Francis solely because of his connection from the Doyles. But that's not the case here.

MARYBETH: Yeah, and now, actually, that I'm sitting here and thinking about it, right, because the next line is the one talking about how Catalina was the one who made up stories. It reminds me, right, earlier in the novel, she always talks about all these stories that she grew up hearing with Catalina. And so I'm wondering if this is

more of a, part of, like, some sort of self-soothing, self-healing for Noemí as well—of sort of going back to those stories that made her feel like everything was okay, that sort of, you know, sort of starting this process of recovering from this traumatic experience. And maybe it's not realistic, but maybe this is what she needs right now, in this moment, is to believe in this, and she needs Francis to believe in this in order for them to sort of move forward, however, they move forward. So, I'm wondering if that's sort of something there in dealing with trauma and colonialism.

ALEX: Yeah, I think that's a cool comparison, too, because, almost like recovery from a traumatic experience, a decolonial process may not necessarily be a straight line. It might not follow a blueprint that perhaps more, like, utopic postcolonial scholars would advocate for—it can be messy, and it might not be a straightforward journey.

[ambient chime transition]

DÉBORAA: One more comment about the characters in general: They are not plain. They are all with a tendency to be round. And I think Noemí is very strong, and her character—like, her personality—since the beginning helps to develop what she's doing during the development of the narrative. But everything is possible because of the interaction that she had with Francis. So I think Francis is a key element for this narrative, because she needed him. He didn't have the power or the strength to create a change in his family, but he knew that the things were not good. And then her presence in the house and the connection between them caused this change. So maybe we can think about decolonization as a process that can't be by one element, but it is necessary to combine a different element to be a reality.

MARYBETH: Speaking of Francis, this actually reminds me of something that my students were saying that I thought was interesting, which is this idea of Noemí having an ally in the home. And even though, like you said, he doesn't have much power, right? He's always described as sort of a weakling and pale—especially, you know, in contrast to Virgil, right? He's always like the weaker member. It's still important for both of them to have allyship with each other. Particularly if we think about, like, the Gothic genre, where women tend to be alone or main characters tend to be by themselves and sort of alone, fighting with this, like, external supernatural haunting force that's coming in. So it's definitely a really interesting dynamic that we're seeing between the two of them. And Francis is the one that explains, you know, certain things to Noemí that's important for her, right? Because after he explains what the gloom is and why it's important, suddenly now she's paying attention when those things happen.

ALEX: The notion of allyship is interesting when considering the partnership between Noemí and Francis. And even though there are moments where Noemí does face Gothic elements and she is alone—like, I'm thinking specifically about the dreams that she has, and they're genuinely frightening to her. I mean, as strong and as vivacious a character as she is—she might not be afraid for very long, she very quickly talks herself out of that fear. But she, I mean, I think that her uneasiness is genuine in those moments. But you're right, Marybeth, I mean, I think she is comforted by Francis. And even when he bumbles a little bit with his words, and even when he's not what we would typically think of as perhaps the Gothic hero, even, like, his brand of maybe what we could talk about as decolonial masculinity is comforting to her because he supports her, and he takes care of her, and he makes resources available to her, when perhaps they would not be without his presence. But all of that help is rooted in allyship.

MARYBETH: Exactly. My students have fondly started calling him “the mushroom boy.” [laughs]

ALEX: Oh, the mushroom boy! That's very cute.

MARYBETH: Because they love that he goes into the cemetery and just picks up mushrooms. And I still cannot—I don't know what to do with that line that Noemí brings out about, “How do you feel about using or eating mushrooms that grew in the same ground that there are dead bodies? And it's, like, what are you supposed to do with that kind of comment?” [laughs]

ALEX: That's pretty metal, though. Maybe Francis is “the metal mushroom man” for the sake of alliteration.

MARYBETH: I'll workshop it with them. [laughs]

ALEX: Great, yes, please let us know what they have to say about it.

[ambient chime transition]

JEHU: The image of ouroboros in the novel is also interesting. Like, as it represents its destruction and recreation. The family was really spreading destruction in *El Triunfo*, but Francis and Noemí recreated themselves after the novel in some sense, and they got out of the snake eating its own tail. Or maybe decorated their own—we

don't know. But it's interesting, like, the family seal is ouroboros. It's all around the house.

MARYBETH: I was looking it up, and one of the symbols it represents, right, is resurrection, which we, you know, automatically would think of, like, Howard, right, as he, like, continuously resurrects himself. But you just actually said something about Noemí and Francis, about their process of resurrection as well, right? You know, we can think about the biblical healing of the fire of High Place as a cleansing moment for them as well. And sort of, like, thinking about, would they be able to take a symbol like that and turn it around into something good, right? Where we're seeing that colonization process or can it just continue right down a certain pathway. And, again, answers are up in the air because we don't really know, but it's an interesting thought to think about.

ALEX: And with that symbol as well, the danger of the cycle is ever present—physically, because it is the family seal, but also it's, like, a mentality that's ingrained in descendants of the Doyle family, too.

MARYBETH: And since Francis is still alive—I mean, that lineage could continue on with him.

ALEX: I know!

[ambient chime transition]

ALEX: That concludes our conversation for today. Thank you so much to our fabulous guests. Débora, Jehu, and Marybeth, it's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you about this fantastic novel, and I know our listeners will be interested in your insights. Additionally, for the folks at home, if you'd like more information about the Big Read, please visit the Big Read section of the Purdue English Department's website. We have a fantastic archive of materials about previous Big Read selections as well as a phenomenal lineup of events for this year's programming. Thank you for joining us. Until next time, this is Alex Anderson with the Big Read podcast.

[upbeat instrumental music fades in and then out]