Siempre Bruja/Always a Witch, Seasons 1 and 2 (Netflix, 2019-20)

Netflix's multinational roster of content has grown exponentially in recent years. A valuable addition to this is the 2019 Colombian series *Siempre Bruja* (translated as *Always a Witch*), now in its second season. *Siempre Bruja* follows Carmen (Angely Gaviria), a seventeen-year-old Afro-Colombian slave in seventeenth-century Cartagena. The opening episode kicks off *in medias res*, with Carmen being burned at the stake as a witch. She manages to escape this fate through time travel – leaping forward to the contemporary Cartagena of 2019. Oscillating as it does between 1649 and the present day, *Siempre Bruja* creates a dialogue between colonial and postcolonial Colombia. The show's cultural specificity is declared prominently from the outset, not only because it is filmed in the Spanish language but via its opening frames, which feature massive text declaring explicitly that we are in Cartagena, 1649, situating the viewer in colonial Colombia, which is under the thumb of Catholic Spain, and in the throes of the Spanish Inquisition. This historical background is utilised to full effect here, creating a thoroughly gothic landscape in which our disbelief is suspended as supernatural elements abound, setting the scene for these elements to bleed into the present. In her discussion of the colonial and postcolonial Gothic, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert suggests that, 'with the inclusion of the colonial, a new sort of darkness – of race, landscape, erotic desire and despair' enters the genre.[1] She further notes that the Gothic may be invoked to give voice either to the fears of colonising settlers, to dramatise the 'horrors and tortures of enslavement', or to those of the colonial subject, 'in order to address the horrors of his/her own condition'.[2]

The sociopolitical context of colonial Colombia frames Carmen's relationships and renders them gothic, as she falls in love with Christobal (Lenard Vanderaa), the son of a Spanish dynastic family. It must be noted here that Christobal's family are slave owners, to whose employ Carmen is in fact bound. The discovery of their romance sets the plot in motion as Christobal is killed, Carmen is sentenced to death, and while imprisoned makes a time-travel bargain with a mystical fellow inmate to save her beloved's life. Some critics argue that the show's depiction of an enslaved woman falling in love with the son of the slave-owning family is problematic and unnecessary,[3] and some suggest that a romance with

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[1] Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 229-58 (p. 229).
[2] Paravisini-Gebert, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic', p. 230.
[3] Michelle Jaworski, '*Always a Witch* Can't Shake the Weight of the Problematic Love Story at its Core', *DailyDot*, 31 March 2019 <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/netflix-always-a-witch-review/> [accessed 16 September 2020].

a member of the Spanish gentry who is not actually her 'owner' could have been equally effective.[4] While raising a valid point, such criticisms fail to recognise that this relationship dynamic is critical, highlighting the colonial settlers' fear of the sexuality of the indigenous Other, here personified by Carmen. As the racial Other to the Spanish coloniser, Carmen incites anxiety and moral panic as she permeates and disassembles the class and racial boundaries of Spanish society. In this way, she inverts the colonial invasion dynamic, thus enacting a central thematic fear of the colonial Gothic, as the subjects of empire provide 'a vast source of frightening Others'.[5]

Siempre Bruja again engages with the key features of the colonial Gothic by positioning an Afro-Colombian female slave as a representational figure not only for the oppression and torture inflicted upon her by the Spanish settlers, but as a character explicitly exoticised as a supernatural being. Carmen is accused of witchcraft upon Christobal's mother's discovery of their romance. Carmen's supernatural identity is therefore associated with her feminine sexuality as well as her status as a racial Other to Spanish-Catholic society. Significantly, it is while she is in captivity that Carmen discovers and learns to utilise her magical powers. This is an intriguing choice; it is specifically Carmen's colonial oppression that reconfigures her identity and establishes her as a supernatural, border-transgressing other. Her burning at the stake and subsequent escape also positions her as a revenant figure, a resurgent representation of the 'horrors and tortures' of colonial enslavement, as theorised by Paravisini-Gebert, as they return to haunt present-day Colombia.

Interestingly, in addition to the Gothic, *Siempre Bruja* also relies heavily on the tradition of telenovelas. We see this in the show's performative exposition-in-excess and character eccentricities. Telenovelas, colloquially referred to as Hispanic 'soap operas', are known for their melodramatic narratives and fast-paced, intertwining plots.[6] On the surface they appear to be a mode in direct opposition with the fear and melancholia of the traditional Gothic. However, *Siempre Bruja* manages to consolidate successfully the complimentary aspects of both, such as the heightened sense of unreality, the melodramatic character motivations, and the complex villainous schemes from which the hero or heroine must escape. The telenovela connection further heightens the specificity of the show as a Latin-

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[4] Ariana Romero, 'Netflix's *Siempre Bruja* Failed Black History Month', *Refinery29*, 4 February 2019 <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/02/223413/netflix-siempre-bruja-always-a-witch-carmen-cristobal-relationship> [accessed 16 September 2020].

[5] Paravisini-Gebert, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic', p. 229.

[6] John Hecht, 'Telenovela Market', *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 September 2006 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/telenovela-market-138873> [accessed 16 September 2020].

American production to the empowerment of suppressed cultures that characterises the postcolonial Gothic. Such cultural specificity reframes the colonial rule that dominated Carmen's seventeenth-century origins within a contemporary Latin-American medium, in an act of postcolonial narrative reclamation. In 2019, Carmen finds empowerment through her previously latent supernatural gifts; exoticised and punished in 1649, they now offer her a source of independence. Her witchcraft is learned out of necessity in the seventeenth century, as it offers her a means of escaping the ultimate colonial suppression of certain death. In the twenty-first century, her witchcraft offers a portal into forging new friendships, entering education, and even saving the day as evil magical threats become more prominent. Carmen's witchcraft, demonised in colonial Colombia, reconfigures the postcolonial power dynamics in a manner that allows Carmen to reclaim and indeed rewrite both her personal and cultural identity narrative.

This foregrounding of national identity and history is one of this show's greatest strengths, and classic gothic tropes are employed to emphasise associated ideological tensions. We see this most clearly with the character of Carmen, who is the personification of disturbingly blurred boundaries between life and death, past and present, victim and oppressor, and even, as discussed below, technology and nature. As the series progresses into the second season, temporal boundaries continue to be blurred, not only by Carmen but by the secondary characters. In the Season Two, Johnny Ki (Dylan Fuentes), Carmen's best friend, guide, and moral compass in contemporary Colombia, finds himself transported to 1649. When he returns, he brings with him a raucous seventeenth-century pirate named Kobo (Óscar Casas), who causes quite the stir in 2020 and motivates a key romance in the second series. If Johnny offers an emotional grounding to balance Carmen's extraordinary presence, then characters like Kobo insert a valuable sense of playfulness, reminding the viewer that, although this show contains dark storylines about slavery, witch-hunts, and demons, it essentially remains an exuberant gothic-telenovela hybrid, with both impulses in constant creative dialogue. As the show blurs the boundaries of genre, its protagonist also blurs racial boundaries; her status as a young Afro-Colombian woman is itself the primary indicator of the gender, racial, and sexual diversity that permeates this show and its prioritisation of representational inclusivity. Finally, as mentioned, she acts as a revenant figure, an anxiety-generating reminder of turbulent national history as it continues to pervade and (re)define contemporary Colombian identity.

Carmen's 'invasion' of 2019 Cartagena further subverts the colonial-control dynamic and brings to the fore classic postcolonial-gothic issues of ownership, heritage and, of course, the return of a violent national history as it permeates and shapes the present.[7] Carmen's place in modern Colombia undermines any false sense of distance and perceived safety from the country's problematic history. This uncanny temporal overlap is also formally incorporated with the soundtrack, which is intelligently employed as a unifying feature connecting visual juxtapositions between time periods, which may otherwise have been jarring. Musical interludes often play over cuts from past to present, in order to smooth the transition. Both seasons highlight local Colombian talent, via artists such as Camilo and the Afro-Latin hip-hop duo Profetas. This is interposed with music from Spanish artists such as C. Tangena in a manner that extends the dialogue between the colonised and the coloniser to all aspects of the diegesis in a subtle but effective manner.

The temporal difference is highlighted again as Carmen is forced to interact with the contemporary technologies of 2019. This is not overdone; there is no clichéd sequence of Carmen being frightened by the buzzing sounds and shining screens of twenty-first-century technology. In a manner that speaks favourably of her feminist characterisation, she is presented as accepting of these technological advances, and technology quickly becomes a useful tool in her efforts to return to her own time, in parallel with her ongoing success in becoming attuned to her own powers. Indeed, the magical and the technological are interrelated in an impressively natural fashion. Carmen's relationship with modern technology and adaptability as a character develop further in the second season as she gains a large social-media following, when evidence of her powers is disseminated online. Another effective technique used to filter Carmen's magical capabilities into her everyday environment is the reaction of dogs to her presence. Dogs turn to take notice of her, and she dictates their actions with the nod of her head or flick of her wrist, a device that forestalls the need for sub-par or quickly dated digital effects. In this way, *Siempre Bruja* recognises that little and often can be more effective than big-budget set pieces. This naturalistic approach offers a sense of spatial and temporal authenticity to the narrative. As well as this, however, in incorporating Carmen's magical powers into every aspect of her world, from technology to nature, the show establishes a kind of lived gothic reality, an everyday Gothic interwoven into Colombian colonial and postcolonial identity. *Siempre Bruja* ultimately offers a highly enjoyable narrative with thoughtfully constructed characters and vibrant production design,

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[7] Paravisini-Gebert, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic', p. 249-54.

the combination of which presents an engaging, challenging, and revealing interpretation of 'the postcolonial Gothic'.

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