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### Memorias Melancólicas:

How Natalia Lafourcade Navigates Cultural Assimilation and Intergenerational Trauma in Verse

*Roots*. Spreading from beneath the ground, yet simultaneously working to grow upward and downward in hopes of breaking the tightly packed earth. Whether adjacently compared to nature or referring to the cultural lines beneath one's skin, the symbol of roots bridging the past and the present is something songwriter Natalia Lafourcade has sought to capture in her music. The Mexican pop star began her career in Mexico, but decided to move to Canada in hopes of a better future, where she later wrote her grammy award winning song, “Hasta la Raíz,” translating to “To the Root.” In a 3 minute long amalgamation of traditional Mexican, huapango guitar riffs and tear-jerking verses, Lafourcade’s piece details her immigration journey and the emotions she feels in moments of cultural shifts. This essay seeks to analyze how Lafourcade uses emotion as a vehicle to portray not just the context of her personal odyssey, but the connection it has in uplifting the generational stories before her. Looking at her song, “Hasta la Raíz,” through the lens of melancholia, I will detail how Lafourcade uses this emotion to highlight the struggles of cultural assimilation. Then, I will further investigate how her grieving process exposes memory as a tool for resilience in accepting one’s culture and learning to navigate intergenerational traumas as a first generation immigrant.

Lafourcade first details the physical pains she experiences as assimilates into this new land.

<i>Cada día sigo sacando espinas</i>	<i>Every day I continue pulling thorns</i>
<i>De lo profundo del corazón</i>	<i>Deep within my heart</i>
<i>En la noche sigo encendiendo sueños</i>	<i>At night I continue lighting dreams on fire</i>
<i>Para limpiar</i>	<i>To clean</i>
<i>Con el humo sagrado, cada recuerdo (3-7).</i>	<i>With sacred smoke, every memory (3-7).</i>

The song opens with this verse, and is accompanied with a steady beat that acts a bass or rhythm, giving the listener a semblance of marching — a journey taking place. Lafourcade's first line is that she's physically pulling out thorns from "deep" within her heart. This version of melancholia seems to uphold the framework presented in Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*. In his analysis, losses are withdrawn from consciousness, leaving the individual with the inability to perceive *what* they have lost, (Freud 1917, 245). Lafourcade clearly shows the listener her pain and grieving as she descriptively sings of a physical representation of pain from "deep" within her heart, yet doesn't make an outright confession about knowing where this pain is coming or even talk about her culture. The metaphors allude to an unconscious historical loss, the generational pains that have been passed down to her without her truly knowing it but in a way where she is still able to feel these "thorns" in her heart. Lafourcade also claims she has to create a "sacred smoke" by "burning [her] dreams" to get rid of all her memories. This verse invokes David Eng & Shinhee Han's "Marginal Man" concept in their work on racial melancholia, *In Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Lafourcade thinks if she ignites her dreams of ideal whiteness, she can fog the memory of her Mexican culture — a trade-off of sorts where she can faithfully subscribe to ideas of assimilation through elaborate self-denial (Eng & Han 2003, 348) — where her denial is seen in clouding her cultural identity with smoke. Her efforts, however, are momentary as the smoke will eventually clear and the memory will still be there.

Her compelling fantasies of what this new land has to offer remains at an unattainable distance and ultimately becomes a lost ideal (Eng & Hans 200, 345).

As Lafourcade continues in her attempt to fully assimilate, she appears to be haunted by her culture and motherland in this new territory:

<i>Cuando mire el cielo en la forma cruel</i>	<i>When I look at the sky, in the cruel form</i>
<i>De una nube gris, aparezcas tú (9-10).</i>	<i>Of a grey cloud, you appear (9-10).</i>

Lafourcade writes that, in a cruelly formed grey cloud a mysterious “you” appears. This “you” can be interpreted as cultural memory, where even if she wants to fully assimilate into a new society, all aspects of her culture, even generational aspects that are unconscious, seem to linger cruelly regardless of whether she moves physically — it is still a part of her. This metaphor is reminiscent of Rea Tajiri’s video *History and Memory*, in which Eng & Han connect to historical loss. Tajiri’s video details a Japanese-American, daughter to a young woman who endured internment camps, and how the daughter vicariously experiences nightmares in the shapes of her mothers histories in the camp. The parallel between Lafourcade’s song and this case study is highlighted in Eng & Hans discussion of a intergenerationally shared melancholia, where the psychic state focuses on bonds among people, instead of an individual basis as Freud posits in his melancholic construction (Eng & Han 2003, 354). While Eng & Hans provide a strong foundation for the analysis of melancholia in Lafourcade’s songs, I find their allusions to children of immigrants repaying historical sacrifices by “berating” and “sacrificing” themselves (Eng & Han 2003, 354) not entirely applicable in this analysis. While the melancholic is said to exhibit symptoms of self-hatred and self-diminution, Lafourcade’s piece suggests that melancholia can coexist with other emotions and that sacrifice may partially be repaid in the form of memory. Memory and remembering one’s cultural roots, as seen through this constant

referral of seeing parts of her culture in this new world around her, allows her cultural identity and memory to stay alive — after all, if something is not remembered, it ceases to exist.

Lafourcade finally realizes that she doesn't need to compromise one side of her identity and instead must embrace the memory of her culture to accept who she is. She realizes she can use memory as a means of re-watering her roots to flourish in this new place.

<i>Yo te llevo dentro</i>	<i>I carry you inside</i>
<i>Hasta la raíz</i>	<i>To the root</i>
<i>Y, por más que crezca</i>	<i>And even if I grow</i>
<i>Vas a estar aquí (13-16).</i>	<i>You will be here (13-16).</i>

While aspects of Freudian melancholia apply in this song's analysis, I will not adhere to all aspects of his structure as it would contradict the message of the song. Particularly, his interpretation that the melancholic is an exhibitionist of emotion where they “always seem as though they [feel] slighted and treated with injustice, (Freud 1975, 248). The chorus of this song, one that repeats on four different occasions, directly combats this claim. If Lafourcade “always” wishes to show off her feelings of being slighted by intergenerational traumas, wouldn't she at all costs continue rejecting this part of her identity out of resentment? Wouldn't she wallow in the despair of carrying the burdens of generations before her, and ignore the memories of her Mexican culture? Lafourcade proves that while she grieves and continues to feel the effects of generational transcendency, she simultaneously chooses to carry it with her throughout her body, later referring to her culture as “[su] rayo de luna,” her beam of moonlight. In a way, her choosing to remember her culture is a practice of hope, a means to prevail as a voice for herself and for those in her community who may not have had this opportunity of seeing upward mobility. This song, seeing as it reflects Lafourcade's life story, could be interpreted as her own

healing drama with a narrative phenomenology as Cheryl Mattingly presents in her work, *The Paradox of Hope: Journeys through a Clinical Borderland*. While Mattingly's structure for hope was founded on a more clinical basis with some intersection points (like socioeconomic status and race), the general concepts of hope as a practice apply here. In healing dramas, there are characters and boundaries crossed between the real and the fantastical (Mattingly 2010, 146) that offer a shimmer of hope in perplexing times that are grounded in patients' realities. Lafourcade crosses this fantastical boundary by using figurative language like personifying natural elements, and adds characters to her personal, narrative phenomenology as seen by this anonymous "you" she refers to throughout the song. This "you" as established before, can be interpreted as her culture, but it is personified to be a human-like character that simultaneously works to create a significant expression of healing *together* with Lafourcade (Mattingly 2010, 145) by reminding her of its existence. Memory, then, is like her roots, a thin but strong connector linking trauma and hope, allowing her to accept she may grieve her past and her ancestors' past, but can also embrace the potential of hope for new beginnings that are grounded in her very own realities.

In looking at Natalia Lafourcade, "Hasta la Raíz," through the lens of melancholia, I have sought to explain how Lafourcade captures the struggles of assimilation the, importance of memory while grieving to keep one's culture alive and the navigation amidst intergenerational traumas. Lafourcade uses in part Eng & Hans' racial melancholia and pieces of Freud's melancholic framework to expose the desire of full assimilation but never quite getting there. In a turn of events, Lafourcade takes a hold of her cultural destiny per say and shifts to spotlighting Mattingly's practice of hope rhetoric, when thinking of this song as her own healing drama. The struggles of the past, daunting as they appear and feel, run alongside and intertwine amongst the

very veins that fuels us to prevail ahead. Melancholia propels the memory, the existence of the one's left behind, the ones who cannot out. And, of ourselves.

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