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## Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media



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## The Persistence of Memory

### Forgiveness, Forgetting, and Cultural Assimilation

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**Abstract** The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* and the 2021 Disney film *Encanto* form a small part of an increasing modern wave of media focused on parent-child conflicts caused by inter-generational trauma and rejection. Other recent works in this genre include the video game *Hades*, the films *Turning Red* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, and the television series *Ms. Marvel*. The traumas in all these films, some directed explicitly at a younger audience and some pitched more broadly, serve as a distinct set of meditations on the immigrant experience, even while not necessarily focusing on literal immigration. They also all invoke imagery of ghosts and death, both echoing specific classical Mediterranean motifs and tropes and incorporating a wide variety of other cultures' supernatural traditions. These works' concern with familial traumas of separation, culture shock, and loss of ancestral memories and connections contrasts sharply with the individual-focused myth of the American Dream common to earlier generations of American media, in which a lone individual typically emigrates, assimilates, and succeeds in a new culture, forming a new family and set of myths. However, themes of assimilation and questions of cultural imperialism also form a bridge between ancient Roman and modern North American anxieties and traditions.

**Keywords** Classical Reception, *Coco*, Immigration, Ancestors, Underworld

## INTRODUCTION

Many families have stories of a lone black sheep who is not accepted by the rest of the family.<sup>1</sup> Often the outcast has loved or married against their parents' wishes; sometimes their location was simply lost after emigration to a new land or assimilation into a different culture. A recent wave of modern media in multiple genres ranging from animated films to video games interrogates this theme of familial erasure and dislocation through diverse ancient rituals of honoring or dishonoring deceased ancestors. They utilize both stories of a literal or metaphorical *katabasis*, or journey to the underworld, and ritualized encounters with ancestral spirits as metaphors for literal emigration from one homeland to a new, theoretically superior country. As a result, these works adapt ancient traditions of maintaining relationships with dead ancestors to explore timeless anxieties about recurring familial conflicts regarding assimilation and estrangement. Ultimately, they all argue that only through renewed communion with disinherited or lost kin can interfamilial harmony and the preservation and adaptation of ancestral traditions – reception studies, in other words – can a truly happy ending be achieved. While these are sometimes adventure stories, they are less *odysseys home* – *nostoi* in the ancient Greek context – than mythic integrations of two communities, the past and present, in which physical or spiritual journeys remain centered around a specific familial unit and its interrelationships.

The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* and the 2021 Disney film *Encanto* form a small part of this increasing modern wave of media focused on parent-child conflicts caused by intergenerational trauma and rejection. Other recent works in this genre include the video game *Hades*, the films *Turning Red* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, and the television series *Ms. Marvel*, as well as other examples not fully discussed in this essay like the recent *Star Wars* sequel trilogy and *Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*. The traumas in all these films, some directed explicitly at a younger audience and some pitched more broadly, serve as a distinct set of meditations on the immigrant experience, even while not necessarily focusing on literal immigration. They also all invoke imagery of ghosts and death, both echoing

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is dedicated first and foremost to my two eldest children, Mclevy and Robert, who introduced me to many of the texts discussed here and shared their insights and interpretations. It is also in memory of the lost branch of my own family, the Keyssars who rejected my grandfather's plea for rescue from the Nazis in 1939, whom he never again acknowledged as family. With the grace and perspective offered by time, I hope they made it safely to Israel and that their descendants are alive and well.



specific classical Mediterranean motifs and tropes but also incorporating a wide variety of other cultures' supernatural traditions.

These works' concern with familial traumas of separation, culture shock, and the loss of ancestral memories and connections contrasts sharply with the individual-focused myth of the American Dream common to earlier generations of American media, in which a lone individual typically emigrates, assimilates, and succeeds in a new culture, forming a new family and set of myths. However, themes of assimilation and questions of cultural imperialism also form a bridge between ancient Roman and modern North American anxieties and traditions, even if not directly inspired by the classical works. Both the common anxiety and the reliance on myth and fantasy as a means of expressing cultural tensions allows for productive dialogues between all these disparate genres and works as they muse over the relationships between death, memory, and immigration.

## ANCESTRAL IMAGES

Since ancient times, the images and names of dead family members have been used to evoke and pay respect to their memories, sometimes figuratively, as in the case of sarcophagi, and sometimes with the belief or practice that such images enable the dead to return to the land of the living. Elite Roman families chose to feature the wax masks, or *imagines*, of specific honored ancestors who had achieved the political rank of aedile or higher in their atria. Those ancestors appeared symbolically again at family funerals, when actors who resembled the dead family members wore their masks and displayed appropriate signifiers of rank while reciting the ancestor's most famous quotations.<sup>2</sup> While Harriet Flower does not view this latter use of ancestor masks as religious or magical in nature, Pollini convincingly argues that the presence of these masked actors at public sacrifices and their symbolic resurrection of these ancestors at later funerals is itself highly supernatural in nature.<sup>3</sup>

This use of images of the dead as supernatural ghost summoners is, of course, not unique in any way to the ancient Romans, being common in, among many

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2 Pol. 6.54.3-4; Flower (1996) 110-4.

3 Flower (2006) 64; Pollini (2012) 28.

other cultures, the Nahuas of Central America, the Yuma nation of Colorado, and the West African Nupe people, all of whose descendants have contributed to and shaped the complex mythologies of North America.<sup>4</sup> Summoning ancestral spirits into artifacts is fundamentally distinct from the Pygmalion or Frankenstein tradition in which male creators, sometimes aided by goddesses, breathe life into new sculptures or bodies that they have created.<sup>5</sup> In those cases, the entirely new beings are generally represented as the children or possibly romantic interests of their creators. In contrast, memorial artworks, most frequently portraits, serve as channels for loved ones to celebrate their dead kin, rather than as wish fulfillment fantasies for single men.

Within American cinematic culture, the use of portraits as evocations of the lost beloved dead features prominently in Gothic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, especially in horror or suspense films. In Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 *Rebecca*, for instance, based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier, the heroine, the second Mrs. De Winter, is persuaded by the passionately obsessed housekeeper Mrs. Danvers to dress herself as an echo of the earlier Mrs. De Winter, herself imitating a portrait of an even earlier mistress of the house. Her invocation of these past ghosts shocks and horrifies her husband Maxim, who is already haunted by Rebecca's memory; this leads to disastrous consequences and the ultimate destruction of the portrait and Manderley itself.<sup>6</sup> In Otto Preminger's 1944 film noir *Laura*, a detective becomes obsessed with the portrait of the apparently dead victim, the eponymous Laura, until she mysteriously returns and their romance can become mutual. Within the more specific context of classical reception, many cinematic depictions of the murder of Julius Caesar accurately feature the statue of his rival Pompeius Magnus looming over Caesar's corpse, while statue busts of the murdered Marcus Aurelius play an important symbolic role in Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator* in reminding the audience of the film's model of a good and just ruler.

Meanwhile, the recent *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, which like its predecessors draws strongly on allusions to the Roman Republic and Principate, prominently features the evil Kylo Ren (formerly Ben Solo) waxing eloquently to the charred mask of his grandfather, Darth Vader (formerly Anakin Skywalker), which he

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4 Connerton (1989) 68; Tatje and Hsu (1969) 154–6.

5 Weiner, Stevens and Rogers (2018) 21.

6 Calabrese (2018) 78–9.

worships on an altar-like pillar.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the *Star Wars* movies, the honored dead Jedi, such as Yoda and Obi-Wan, become Force Ghosts who can continue to inspire and communicate with their students, whereas the mask of Vader remains a hollow silent mockery that contradicts the spiritual redemption of the Force Ghost of Anakin Skywalker. Communion with ancestors, as in the Roman tradition, thus depends on the virtue of both ancestor and descendant.

## MEMORY SANCTIONS

While such evocations of the dead through portraiture in both ancient art and modern movies have been extensively studied, the deliberate erasure of the dishonored dead or living members of the family and any connections to ancient practice have not been well analyzed.<sup>8</sup> The general study of Roman memory sanctions, or, to use the popular modern term, *damnatio memoriae*, is extensive, but has predominantly focused on the erasure of publicly prominent figures like unpopular Emperors and Empresses, such as Nero and Agrippina Minor.

At the same time, this type of censorship could and did also exist in more ordinary families. For instance, D. Junius Silanus was censured and then symbolically cast out by his birth father, T. Manlius Torquatus, in 140 BCE, after being convicted for extortion in a private familial trial and then committing suicide.<sup>9</sup> Notably, Torquatus carried out both the trial and his subsequent deliberate rejection of his son's funeral while facing his own ancestral mask of Torquatus Imperiosus, suggesting that this act was both done with the full support of the ancestors and so as not to disgrace them. However, while Valerius Maximus was sympathetic to Manlius Torquatus's strict parenthood, other ancient writers like Cicero and Pliny were more critical and this did not in fact repair the Torquati's reputation, instead casting them as harsh ideologues. As is often the case with stories of *damnatio memoriae*, ultimately the repudiation itself was more remembered than the actual crimes of the child involved or the other more heroic deeds of his family. The blank space on the wall shaped a ghost that haunted

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<sup>7</sup> *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015); Charles (2015) 290–2.

<sup>8</sup> Hanson (2007) 83–91; Flower (1996) 110–4; Fejfer (2009) 70–2.

<sup>9</sup> Flower (1996) 64; Val. Max. V.8.3.

and condemned the family. Similarly, Augustus's exile of his scandalous daughter Julia and her own daughter Julia Minor may have symbolically erased them from the virtuous model of the harmonious imperial Julio-Claudian clan, but such actions left gaps in both the power structure and the basic functionality of their actual family.<sup>10</sup>

This story of Manlius Torquatus and his son is echoed in the more modern works that form the focus of this paper. One of the distinguishing features between these works and the more common literary trope of rebellious teenagers is their emphasis that the parent or grandparents' abusive or repressive decisions stem from their own childhood traumas. However, an even more significant commonality lies in the very diversity of these characters, unlike the previously mentioned White Skywalker family: these 21<sup>st</sup> century media families are Mexican, Colombian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Greek. I will briefly summarize the memory sanctions in these films before turning to a comparative analysis of their classical receptions.

The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* reveals an ancestral trauma: Hector, the great-great-grandfather of Miguel, the child protagonist, had left his rural Mexican family to seek his fortune abroad as a musician, a young Orpheus, but never returned home. As a consequence, Hector's descendants left behind in Mexico have become insular and reject all music as a symbol of their anger over his abandonment. Familial reconciliation is only achieved when Miguel learns in the Land of the Dead that Hector had been about to return home when he was murdered by his colleague, who was focused only on individual success. Classical and Meso-american motifs both abound in this film: Hector's body is literally been dragged around by his rival, echoing the climax of Homer's *Iliad*, and the boy Miguel, like Astyanax, is thrown off a cliff into a volcanic oubliette. While Hector's wife, Imelda, eventually does rescue both of them, she refuses to look at or acknowledge Hector during their flight out of the deep pit of the underworld, gender-bending the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.

In the 2021 Disney musical *Encanto*, the Madrigal family of Colombia has fled violence in their birth city for a new homeland, only for the matriarch Abuela (Spanish for grandmother) to be consumed by an obsession of serving their new village at the expense of the mental and physical health of her own family. When her son Bruno and then her granddaughter Mirabel are insufficiently helpful to the village and family, they are critiqued or berated by Abuela. As a result,

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<sup>10</sup> Milnor (2005) 88.



Bruno literally disappears into the walls of the house and Mirabel is excluded from family photos and told to absent herself from family occasions, to permanently remain a child in the nursery, and to stay silent. The two characters are written out of the story of their family; Mirabel's opening song introducing the varied members of the Madrigals omits herself, because she does not have any supernatural powers, and the rest of the family and the community refuse to talk about Bruno (while singing at length about their mistrust of his prophecies). As insufficiently heroic, these characters are denied a role in the narrative, much like the Greek tragic character Elektra is exiled to the border by her mother Clytemnestra, labeled a *phygas* or wanderer, and disinherited from her role as a royal princess of Argos in Sophocles' *Elektra*, as well as in other narratives of her tale.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, their superhero siblings lose their powers and the entire magical house collapses as a magical result of Bruno and Mirabel's exclusion, much like the fall of the House of Atreus in Greek tragic narratives. Healing and rebuilding only becomes possible once Abuela has confessed the dark truths of her own past as a refugee from violence and acknowledged the abuse of her family members that resulted from her own trauma. Unlike the Greek tragedies, a happy ending then becomes feasible, although this film is unusual in the classic Disney canon for not ending with the kind of wedding that marks the triumphant finale of a comedy.

The 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, written and directed by Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, known as "the Daniels," directly questions the idea that its Chinese protagonist has chosen wisely in her decision to emigrate to the United States and live a life of economic struggle, anxiety, and cultural alienation. Her current life is represented as her worst possible timeline in the multiverse, while she encounters other superior timelines in her struggles with her queer supervillain daughter, who wishes to erase all the pain of her past traumas. Similarly, the 2022 Disney animated film *Turning Red* focuses on the conflict between the teenage girl Mei-li, who feels drawn to modern Canadian culture and her diverse friend group as well as the ancestor worship of her mother's family, and her traditionally focused adult mother, who has buried her own anger at her mother's mandates regarding adherence to Chinese culture. In *Ms. Marvel* (2022), the teenager Kamala Khan rebels against her Ammi, who fled the mythical traditions of Djinn celebrated by her own mother in Pakistan in favor of a more rational, honorable life in the U.S., only to find her own daughter obsessed

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11 Kasimis (2021) 12–3.

with new American myths in the form of superheroes. In all these stories, a happy ending does not come through a triumphant solitary Hero's Journey but through difficult conversations and uneasy truces among children and women of different generations. In doing so, they offer a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of immigrant experiences, in which the costs of cultural loss and strained familial connections are emphasized as much as the potential individual economic gains of emigration.<sup>12</sup>

### **HADES AND IMMIGRANT STORIES**

The connections between these works and memory sanctions, the role of ghosts, or the ancient Mediterranean world may at first seem more tenuous than transparent. The creators of *Coco* or *Encanto*, while drawing from a deep cultural well-spring of stories about erased relatives and the underworld, were not necessarily intending to invoke explicit connections to Greek and Roman religious and mythical patterns. In some cases, however, the parallels or direct invocations of the ancient afterlife seem very direct and obvious. In the RockStar 2020 video game *Hades*, the protagonist Zagreus initially constantly attempts to emigrate from the ancient Greek underworld, ruled by his father Hades, into the surface world of ancient Greece, which he imagines to be a perfect utopia. However, he inevitably dies and returns back to his claustrophobic underworld home, oppressively patriarchal father Hades, and complicated familial structure. The gameplay, described as “rogue-lite,” thus enacts a cyclical quest in which Zagreus learns new information and can unlock new items in each iteration but also never achieves his initial dreams, always eventually dying either in the underworld or from the harsh light of the world above. He is a failed immigrant trying to cross the border to flee his own trauma and reinvent himself as a skilled individual hero. Yet, in the course of his repeated Heroic Journeys, it becomes clear that Zagreus's relatives in the surface world, the Olympian gods, are themselves relatively selfish and greedy, sending him gifts while trying to reshape him in their own image, as acts of divine cultural imperialism. They are uninterested

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<sup>12</sup> These are only a small fraction of this increasingly popular theme in modern media; other examples include *The Mandalorian* (Disney, 2021–), *Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (Nintendo, 2023), and *Umma* (Shim, 2022).

in a demigod who claims both worlds, preferring to ignore his underworld ties in favor of their own prejudices about godhood and the world above.

Portraits also play a key role in the gameplay of *Hades*; Zagreus discovers a hidden portrait in his father's bedroom and eventually is able to find the image of his erased mother, Persephone, learn of her own familial trauma and conflicts with her mother Demeter, and bring her story back into the main cyclical narrative. In the primary ending of the game, Zagreus finally brings his mother back home to Hades. The three (and their dog Cerberus) form a reconciled family back in the underworld symbolized by a new familial portrait, while Zagreus becomes a trusted lieutenant in the family business at home. Although the game can continue past this point in a further quest to restore harmony among all the Olympian Gods, the character arc of Zagreus himself largely concludes with the reunification of his family.

By working over many iterations of the game to slowly develop his relationships and friendships, Zagreus is able to overcome his generational family trauma and realize that emigration to a mythical surface utopia is not in fact the answer to all his problems. He also finds a new purpose in healing the broken relationships of others, reuniting Orpheus and Eurydice as well as Achilles and Patroclus while also potentially fixing past relationship drama with his own lovers, Megaera the Fury and Thanatos the god of Death. Zagreus learns, echoing the *Wizard of Oz*'s own *katabasis* and the 2017–2020 television series about morality and the afterlife, that the real *Good Place* is the friends he made along the way.<sup>13</sup>

Catherynne Valente notes that major modern works of children's literature and media, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *The Nutcracker*, feature young girl heroines on their own problematically feminist journeys of self-discovery. She associates these modern fantasies with the ancient myths of the Sumerian goddess Inanna and Greek goddess Persephone, who become trapped in the underworld while focusing on regaining their previous familial ties.<sup>14</sup> All these girls also share a task of fixing male characters' broken or dismembered bodies, whether the Nutcracker's injury or the Scarecrow's brain. Zagreus in *Hades* not only shares a close relationship to Persephone but, as the game progresses, focuses more and more on these prototypically feminine *katabasis* goals of restoring familial harmony and healing others and the

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13 Valente (2008), 135.

14 Valente (2008), 126.

landscape, rather than on becoming an adult man or finding permanent satisfaction through killing monsters.

Like Dorothy, Alice, Clara, or Peter Pan, Zagreus in fact can never actually grow up; he will always remain a rebellious teenager with posters of his favorite deities on his wall. This blurring of traditionally gendered heroic journeys both reflects more modern attitudes towards masculine and feminine prototypical virtues and also uses the genderfluidity and same-sex relationship tolerance of ancient Greek mythology and history to promote such values. Zagreus of *Hades* can both fight Theseus in a gladiatorial arena and offer Achilles relationship advice, while pursuing relationships with both male and female romantic prospects. The liminal aspects of a cyclical *katabasis* thus become a means for breaking new grounds in heroic representation in video games.

## **COCO AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM**

The Pixar film *Coco* takes place entirely on the *Día de los Muertos*, a Mexican festival that weaves together Aztec and Nahua traditions, the Tlaxochimaco and Miccaihuitl rituals of honoring and inviting their departed ancestors, with the Mediterranean and Catholic traditions of All Souls' Day and the Roman festival of the Parentalia. According to 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century records, the Aztecs celebrated the Tlaxochimaco ritual over the course of a month in late August and September, including altars featuring images of dead ancestors, the ritual sharing of food and drink with the deceased, and the decoration of these altars with marigold flowers.<sup>15</sup> Modern Nahua ritual, the Miccaihuitl or Festival of the Dead, drawing from varied ancient indigenous traditions, prescribes the construction of an altar on October 30<sup>th</sup>, featuring the favorite foods and drinks of the honored dead. Friar Pedro de Gante in Mexico in the 16<sup>th</sup> century worked to deliberately syncretize indigenous rituals with those of Catholic Spaniards.<sup>16</sup> The festival of All Souls' Day – Todos Los Santos or Tous Saints – in the southern and Western Mediterranean was not institutionalized by the Catholic Church until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was already a reluctant compromise by a church which had attempted to stamp out the echoes of the Roman Parentalia in mid-February,

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15 Carmichael and Sayer (2003) 25–7.

16 Kroger and Granziera (2012) 137–9.

the traditional pagan practices of bringing food and drink to ancestors' graves to celebrate with them.<sup>17</sup> Ausonius, St. Augustine, and Ambrose of Milan had all attempted to restrict such celebrations on the grounds that they were too pagan, or redirect them solely to the celebration of martyrs. But this attempt had largely failed and Spaniards, French, Italians, and North Africans continued to honor their ancestors in fashions very similar to the *Parentalia* and, once they encountered Mesoamerican peoples, Tlaxochimaco.

In the Roman *Parentalia*, the living family members shared food and drink with the dead, even pouring it down specially designed tubes at certain tombs in Roman North Africa.<sup>18</sup> They also decorated their ancestors' graves with roses and violets, both on this occasion and especially at the summer *Rosalia* and spring *Violaria* festivals. Relevantly for *Coco*, and unlike the traditional Tlaxochimaco rituals, Romans also faced negative consequences if they failed to properly honor their ancestors. The Roman poet Ovid references a time during war – possibly the Caesar-Pompey civil wars – when people forgot to make offerings at the *Parentalia* and “ghosts wandered everywhere and filled the streets with shapeless souls.”<sup>19</sup> The *Lemuria*, a festival which followed soon after the *Parentalia*, was devoted specifically to exorcising these dishonored ancestors; the paterfamilias would offer them black beans at midnight while the rest of the family clashed bronze pots and chanted “Ghosts of our ancestors, be gone!”<sup>20</sup>

In *Coco*'s elaborate mythic representation of *Día de los Muertos*, Hector, whose head has been torn off the family photo for purportedly abandoning the family, now as a ghost cannot cross the marigold bridge to celebrate with his family. His descendants suffer as a result; they are forced into the alternate family occupation of shoemaking and forbidden from performing or celebrating music, as Miguel wishes to do. Meanwhile Hector's spirit lives in the barren underworld ghettos and is in imminent danger of being dissolved into shapelessness due to a lack of appropriate honors and memories from the living. Only through a visit from his great-great-grandson – and the power of music – can Hector be redeemed and reunited with his family, restored to the familial *ofrenda*, the ceremonial temporary altar honoring their ancestors, and saved from dissolution.

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17 Dolansky (2011) 149.

18 Dolansky (2011) 133.

19 Ov., *fast.*, 550; Dolansky (2011) 143–4.

20 Ov., *fast.*, 550.



Thus *Coco* mixes indigenous Mexican traditions, Christianized Roman festivals and beliefs about the dead, and a substantial dollop of original storytelling to tell a story about the importance of remembering those who have emigrated from the home village and the value of family.

### **OCTAVIA, ENCANTO, AND VENGEFUL GHOSTS**

The notion that the dishonored or forgotten dead can serve as actively vengeful or hostile spirits is brought to life most clearly in Latin literature in the play *Octavia*, originally wrongly attributed to Seneca but now generally agreed to have been written by another author shortly after Emperor Nero's death.<sup>21</sup> In the *Octavia*, Nero's murdered mother, the Empress Agrippina Minor, appears as a vengeful Fury. While she is understandably upset about her son having attempted to explode a boat under her and then having sent soldiers to stab her, the ghostly Agrippina focuses her particular wrath on Nero's erasure of her memory: "The fierce tyrant rages against his mother's name, wants my services obliterated, throws down the images and inscriptions that bear my memory throughout the world – that world which my unlucky love gave him as a boy to rule to my own harm."<sup>22</sup> As Lauren Donovan Ginsberg phrases it, "Agrippina is a woman who will not be forgotten and who will not allow us to forget."<sup>23</sup> Nero's unfilial erasure of his mother's memory – indeed, of a woman who had the title of Mother of the Nation – brings down his own destruction in the *Octavia* and his haunting by Agrippina herself. Agrippina explicitly imagines that Nero's downfall will come in the form of his exile and exposure to everything – to being cast out of his *domus* and his familial tomb. The author, who almost certainly survived Nero's rule based on textual references to later works, would have known that Nero was both subject to *damnatio memoriae* himself and buried with his birth family, the Ahenobarbi, rather than with the other Julio-Claudians in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Similarly, Agrippina herself was buried in a modest tomb near the site of her murder.

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<sup>21</sup> Ferri (2003) 5.

<sup>22</sup> Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia*, 605–10.

<sup>23</sup> Ginsberg (2017) 39.

This erasure of disfavored family members and subsequent catastrophic consequences is echoed in the 2021 Disney film *Encanto*. In *Encanto*, the prophet son, Bruno, has faced endless rebukes for his unfavorable predictions of dire futures from his family and his community, much like many ancient Mediterranean prophets such as Teiresias or Calchas. As a result, while they believe him to have fled or died, he has instead hidden himself inside the walls of his own family's house, occasionally appearing briefly in the background wearing a mysterious hooded green ruana or making noises like a ghost. The family has responded to Bruno's disappearance by banning any discussion of him, although they are willing to tell the stories of his disastrous prophecies.

Bruno's niece Mirabel, who apparently lacks a magical gift unlike her sisters and cousins, is excluded from family portraits and told to absent herself from major family festivals and occasions or remain silent. As a consequence, their magical house, or Casita, ultimately cracks and collapses, only being rebuilt once the family has reconciled and reintegrated the stories and memories of Mirabel and Bruno. Similarly, the House of Hades in the game *Hades* cannot be completed or fully reconstructed until Persephone's story has been reclaimed and retold and she has been brought back to her strange family. The moral of the danger of denying harsh truths and disrespecting unconventional family members again suggests a metaphorical linkage between the afterlife and the home country of immigrants. Intergenerational harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of both painful memories, tolerance of new ideas, and maintaining cultural traditions.

## IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Why are these themes and tropes so popular at this particular moment in American history – and why did they resonate at the time of Ovid and Nero? In both cases, two different strands are resonating with each other – and this is likely less a case of direct classical reception than of a common cultural metaphor responding to similar needs. The early Roman principate was a time of constant and frequent immigration, both voluntary and, perhaps even more commonly, through slavery that led, in some cases, to freedom and a new life in Roman cities. Tombstone inscriptions and letters tell us hundreds of stories of these new Roman citizens trying to forge new identities or to make connections between their birth families and cultures and their new homelands. For instance,

the Egyptian-Roman sailor Apion wrote home in one papyrus letter to tell his father that his new Roman citizen name was now Antonius Maximus, while simultaneously invoking the favor of the Graeco-Egyptian god Serapis. In another letter, many years later, the same man told his sister, still in Egypt, about his new Italian wife and child and signed his name only as Antonius Maximus, suggesting gradual assimilation and acceptance of the new name over time.<sup>24</sup> In other echoes of such newly forged identities, some tombstone inscriptions of freed women establish foundations for fellow guild-members to honor them at the *Parentalia*, because they lack biological descendants or ancestors of their own.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, our own global 21<sup>st</sup> century waves of voluntary and involuntary immigration, especially in the United States, are occurring at a time when communication with and travel to ancestral homelands is easier and more possible than ever before. The same questions that Antonius Maximus, formerly known as Apion, might have pondered about whether to keep worshiping Serapis now that he lived in the Italian port of Misenum are echoed in Pixar's *Turning Red* character Mei-li's initial ambivalence about maintaining the temple to her theologically mythical red panda spirit ancestor. Like so many immigrants, whether voluntary or coerced, both these figures address the question of how someone might adopt a "yes, and" rather than an "either/or" approach to a new home.

The early Roman principate was also a time of tremendous political and social upheaval in which people like the author of the *Octavia* would have seen their universal parental figures – the symbolic fathers and mothers of the country – repeatedly dishonored, erased, and then potentially returned to honor and commemoration depending on the particular needs and connections of whoever was currently Emperor. From a religious perspective, it must have been traumatizing and confusing to be told to pray for the spirit and memory of Agrippina or Julia Domna, one day, to spit on her image and erase her name the next, and then celebrate her return to favor a few years later. Furthermore, given the customs of Roman religion, there would be a constant fear that those dishonored spirits, especially powerful ones like those of the imperial family, might come back to haunt you in the Lemuria.

Harriet Flower begins her book on Roman memory sanctions with a quote from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, her graphic novel memoir about life in Iran in

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24 Viereck (1898), 2.423.

25 Dolansky (2011) 146–8.

the 1970s and 1980s: “One can forgive but one should never forget.”<sup>26</sup> For Satrapi, this moral emphasizes the importance in her work of telling the mostly truthful family legends about the personal consequences of the Shah’s coup, the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War. She argues that tales of intergenerational traumas need to be passed down not as part of a revenge cycle but in order to preserve their culture and understand past injustices. In other words, Satrapi considers some haunting of the present by the past’s ghosts to be emotionally and culturally necessary.

This conjunction of “forgiving and forgetting” traces its roots in English back to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, whose patriarch protagonist ultimately asks Cordelia, the emigrant daughter whom he disinherited and erased from the family tree, to “forgive and forget” the injuries he has done her.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Agrippina and Drusus’ ghosts come back to haunt later writers and beg for their images and stories’ resurrection as they do in the *Octavia*, because, for them, *damnatio memoriae* is a form of permanent exile from both their families’ traditions and from Rome itself.<sup>28</sup> Without these erased ancestors or descendants, the story and the images are permanently marred and distorted; the family cannot be whole and further trauma and pain will occur.

The movie *Coco* ends with virtually the same quote, but with quite different resonance, suggesting that the screenwriters Adrian Molina and Matthew Aldrich might have been familiar with at least the cinematic version of *Persepolis*, which premiered in 2007, ten years before *Coco*. At the climax, the young Miguel pleads to his Abuela on his Abuelo’s behalf: “You don’t have to forgive him but we shouldn’t forget him.”<sup>29</sup> Here, the specific forgiveness is requested but not assumed; the remembering is collective. For Miguel, no one deserves to be forgotten regardless of their choices; it is perhaps not coincidental that among the figures we see in the ghetto of *Coco*’s Forgotten are groups of arguably queer women, who might not have had descendants to remember them. Both immigration and homecoming – free travel across the border checkpoint of the Underworld – are required for a happy ending and justice, just as Zagreus’ father Hades eventually lets him cross briefly into the surface world only for Zagreus

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26 Satrapi (2003), 14.

27 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV.7.

28 Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia*, 605–10.

29 Pixar (2017).

to willingly return home every time. One of the initial crises of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is caused by the granddaughter Joy's difficulty in speaking to her grandfather, sharing no fluent common tongue or knowledge of a word like "same-sex partner". Without such active maintenance and border-crossings, the past continues to haunt and traumatize the present and future, and their families, houses, and in some case entire multiverses will self-destruct.

We live, in the United States and in many other nations, at a moment of profound cultural conflict in which many dominant elites wish to retain control over a monolithic cultural narrative and to erase all the uncomfortable truths of the past and anything or anyone that might seem different or less admirable, just as various Roman elites sought to construct a "Good Emperors" patchwork version of history that omitted the Caligulas, Domitians, and Elagabaluses from the story. In her recent work on the current removal of Confederate and imperialist monuments from American spaces, Erin Thompson noted with regard to Native American and immigrant narrative erasure that "Even the most vigorous attempts to scrub away all traces of a history will not work if people are unwilling to forget."<sup>30</sup> These are stories both then and now of the need to connect with actual or metaphorical ghosts coming to reclaim their stories and bridge those divides. They are collective acts of cultural rebellion against such a narrow, positivist view of the past. It is unsurprising that myths of transitions, erasures, forgetting, and haunting of the multiethnic, multicultural world of the Roman Mediterranean are being used to interpret and understand these current traumas, while at the same time engaging in dialogue with the traditions of many other human societies. Roman *damnatio memoriae* was fundamentally rarely successful; if anything, modern people are more likely to remember the Neros or Caligulas than the dull if respectable Nervas and Vespasians. These modern stories also warn of the dangers of collapse and ongoing trauma if the repressive erasure is maintained. We don't have to forgive, but we should never forget.

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson (2022) 171.



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