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# Roots That Remember: Intergenerational Trauma, Biopolitics of Care, and Posthuman Kinship in *Coco* (2017) and *Encanto* (2021)

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Pixar's *Coco* (2017) and Disney's *Encanto* (2021) as resonant cultural texts that meditate on intergenerational trauma, memory and care within familial and ecological contexts. Drawing upon Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, the films are approached as narratives in which inherited grief, silences and emotional obligations circulate across generations, shaping identities and relationships long after the original wounds have receded from articulation. Here, trauma is neither spectacular nor singular; it persists quietly within domestic rituals, musical expression and expectations. Situated within the interdisciplinary frameworks of health humanities, the paper engages Arthur Frank and Rita Charon to conceptualize suffering as relational and narratively embodied rather than clinically diagnosed. Grief, anxiety and burnout emerge not as individual pathologies but as shared conditions produced by familial economies of care. Through Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's reflections on precarity, the study further argues that family in both films operates as a subtle regulatory system. In *Coco*, remembrance becomes a condition of survival, producing an affective economy in which the forgotten risk ontological erasure. In *Encanto*, magical productivity determines bodily worth, rendering unexceptional or non-performing bodies vulnerable within a seemingly nurturing household. Care thus reveals itself as a mode of soft governance, disciplining bodies and emotions through love, duty and tradition. Extending the analysis into eco-cinema and posthuman thought, the paper draws on Donna Haraway's ethics of multispecies kinship and Jane Bennett's vital materialism to foreground more-than-human agents—ancestral spirits, sentient homes and living landscapes—as active participants in healing and remembrance. These animated worlds challenge anthropocentric and biomedical models of wellbeing, proposing kinship as ecological, interdependent and ethically entangled. Ultimately, *Coco* and *Encanto* imagine survival not through productivity or mastery, but through collective memory, relational care and posthuman belonging.

**Keywords**: *intergenerational trauma, postmemory, biopolitics of care, health humanities, posthuman kinship, eco-cinema, animated film*

## I. Introduction: Remembering, Care and the Afterlives of Family

Animated cinema has increasingly emerged as a powerful site for negotiating questions of memory, trauma and care, particularly within narratives that foreground family as both an emotional refuge and a regulatory structure. Pixar's *Coco* (2017) and Disney's *Encanto* (2021), though marketed as family-oriented animated films, function as complex cultural texts that articulate the quiet persistence of intergenerational trauma and the affective economies of care through which such trauma is sustained, negotiated and occasionally healed. Both films situate familial love not as an unproblematic source of comfort but as a terrain shaped by inherited grief, unspoken loss and moral obligation. Trauma here is neither spectacular nor catastrophic; instead, it unfolds through domestic rituals, silences, expectations and everyday acts of care that bind generations together.

Set against culturally specific backdrops inspired by Mexican and Colombian traditions respectively, *Coco* and *Encanto* dramatize how the past refuses to remain past. In *Coco*, memory becomes a condition of existence itself: to be forgotten is to face ontological erasure. In *Encanto*, magical productivity determines one's value within the family, rendering emotional distress and non-performance as forms of invisibility. Both narratives foreground young protagonists—Miguel and Mirabel—who inherit emotional burdens they did not create but are nonetheless expected to carry. Their struggles exemplify what Marianne Hirsch defines as "postmemory", a form of memory transmitted so deeply and affectively that it shapes identity despite being temporally removed from the original trauma (Hirsch 5). Through these characters, the films explore how unresolved loss travels across generations, embedding itself within familial structures and everyday practices.

Rather than approaching trauma through the language of pathology or diagnosis, this paper situates *Coco* and *Encanto* within the interdisciplinary framework of health humanities. Drawing on Arthur Frank's assertion that suffering is fundamentally relational and narratively constituted, the films are read as stories in which grief and anxiety and burnout emerge not as individual failures but as shared conditions produced within familial economies of care (Frank 22). Similarly, Rita Charon's emphasis on narrative recognition and ethical listening allows for a reading of these films as exercises in collective storytelling, where healing begins not through cure but through acknowledgement and relational understanding (Charon 4). Animation, with its heightened affective register and symbolic elasticity, becomes a particularly potent medium for articulating these non-clinical forms of suffering.

At the same time, *Coco* and *Encanto* complicate sentimental narratives of family by revealing how care can function as a mode of governance. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, this paper argues that family in both films operates as a subtle regulatory system that disciplines bodies, emotions and desires through love, tradition and duty rather than overt coercion (Foucault

140). In *Coco*, the obligation to remember becomes a moral economy that determines who is permitted to persist. In *Encanto*, magical ability operates as a biopolitical marker of worth, regulating which bodies are celebrated and which are rendered marginal. Achille Mbembe's reflections on precarity further illuminate how belonging within these families is conditional, shaped by productivity, usefulness and emotional compliance (Mbembe 37).

Extending beyond human-centered frameworks, this study also engages posthuman and eco-critical thought to examine how more-than-human agents participate in processes of memory and healing. Drawing on Donna Haraway's call to "make kin" beyond biological lineage, the films are read as narratives that imagine kinship as ecological, multispecies and ethically entangled (Haraway 103). Ancestral spirits, sentient homes, magical landscapes and material objects are not passive backdrops but active participants in sustaining, remembering and repairing familial bonds. Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" further enables a reading of these animated worlds as assemblages in which agency is distributed across human and non-human actors alike (Bennett 23).

By bringing together postmemory studies, health humanities, biopolitical critique and posthuman theory, this paper argues that *Coco* and *Encanto* propose alternative models of wellbeing that resist neoliberal ideals of productivity, mastery and individual resilience. Survival, in these films, is imagined not through exceptional performance or emotional self-sufficiency but through collective memory, relational care and ethical interdependence. In foregrounding quiet suffering and communal healing, *Coco* and *Encanto* invite viewers to reconsider family not merely as a site of inheritance but as a dynamic space where trauma, care and kinship are continuously renegotiated across generations and species.

## II. Theoretical Frameworks: Trauma, Care and Beyond the Human

Understanding *Coco* and *Encanto* as narratives of intergenerational trauma and care requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that moves beyond clinical, anthropocentric, and individualistic models of suffering. Trauma in these films is not event-based or spectacular but affective, inherited and embedded within everyday familial life. To address this complexity, this section brings together postmemory studies, health humanities, biopolitical theory, and posthuman thought, establishing a conceptual foundation for the film analyses that follow.

### 2.1 Postmemory and the Transmission of Inherited Trauma

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides a crucial framework for understanding how trauma circulates across generations in *Coco* and *Encanto*. Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before—experiences they "remember" only through stories, images, behaviors and

emotional atmospheres rather than direct recollection (Hirsch 5). Unlike memory grounded in lived experience, postmemory is mediated, imaginative and deeply affective, yet it exerts a powerful influence on identity formation.

In both films, the younger protagonists inherit emotional burdens shaped by foundational traumas they did not witness. Miguel in *Coco* grows up within the shadow of Imelda Rivera's abandonment and heartbreak, which has hardened into a family-wide ban on music. Similarly, Mirabel in *Encanto* lives under the weight of Abuela Alma's unprocessed trauma of displacement and loss, which manifests as an obsession with order, productivity and familial perfection. In neither case are these traumas narrated explicitly at the outset; instead, they are embedded in everyday rituals, prohibitions and expectations. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory operates precisely through such structures, noting that it is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch 22).

Importantly, Hirsch's framework allows trauma to be understood outside the context of large-scale historical violence alone. While her work originates in Holocaust studies, she explicitly argues that postmemory can illuminate "familial, cultural and national" forms of inherited loss (Hirsch 33). This expansion is especially relevant to animated family films, where trauma is often displaced onto metaphor, fantasy and affect rather than overt historical narration. In *Coco* and *Encanto*, postmemory becomes audible in silences, visible in restrictions and palpable in the anxiety of children who feel responsible for maintaining familial stability.

## 2.2 Health Humanities and Narrative Conceptions of Suffering

While postmemory explains how trauma is transmitted, health humanities offers a framework for understanding how such trauma is lived, narrated and ethically encountered. Arthur Frank's rejects the medicalization of suffering that isolates illness or distress within individual bodies. Instead, Frank argues that suffering is inherently relational and narrative, shaped through stories people tell about their bodies, families and communities (Frank 22). For Frank, stories do not merely represent suffering; they actively structure how suffering is understood and endured.

This narrative conception of suffering is particularly relevant to *Coco* and *Encanto*, where grief, anxiety and burnout are never named as diagnoses but are nonetheless deeply embodied. Luisa's exhaustion in *Encanto*, for instance, is not framed as a mental health disorder but as the cumulative effect of being narratively positioned as "the strong one." Similarly, Miguel's alienation is not a rebellion against his family per se but a response to a narrative that has erased music as a legitimate form of self-expression. Frank emphasizes that such stories are ethical encounters, noting that "to be ill is to be in need of stories that make suffering meaningful" (Frank 53).

Rita Charon's theory of narrative medicine further deepens this perspective by foregrounding the ethics of listening and recognition. Charon argues that care begins not with intervention or cure but with the capacity to "recognize, absorb, interpret and be moved by the stories of others" (Charon 4). Applied to these films, healing occurs not when problems are magically resolved but when silenced stories are finally heard. In *Coco*, the recovery of Héctor's narrative—his erasure, love and betrayal—becomes the key to both personal and collective healing. In *Encanto*, Mirabel's role is less that of a savior and more that of a listener who makes visible the unspoken suffering of each family member.

Health humanities thus allows these films to be read as critiques of biomedical and neoliberal models of wellbeing. Suffering is not treated as an individual failure requiring correction but as a shared condition produced within relational systems of care, expectation and obligation (Charon 10). Animation becomes an especially effective medium for articulating such affective states, allowing emotional truth to be expressed symbolically rather than diagnostically.

## 2.3 Biopolitics, Precarity and the Governance of Family

While care in *Coco* and *Encanto* is emotionally sustaining, it is also regulatory. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics offers a way to understand how power operates not through repression alone but through the management of life, normalization of behavior and cultivation of "productive" bodies (Foucault 139). Though Foucault's work primarily addresses state institutions, scholars have extended biopolitical analysis to domestic and familial spaces, where norms are enforced through affection, duty and moral expectation rather than law.

In both films, the family functions as a biopolitical apparatus that governs who belongs, who is valued and under what conditions. In *Coco*, remembrance itself becomes a technology of power: only those who are remembered are allowed to persist in the Land of the Dead. Forgetting results in a second, more final death, rendering memory a form of life-sustaining governance. In *Encanto*, magical ability operates as a biopolitical marker of worth. Bodies are valued according to their usefulness to the family and community, creating a hierarchy that renders Mirabel's non-magical body precarious.

Achille Mbembe's work on precarity sharpens this analysis by foregrounding how certain lives are rendered conditionally valuable. Mbembe argues that modern power increasingly operates by exposing individuals to vulnerability and insecurity, producing lives that must continually justify their existence (Mbembe 37). Within the Madrigal household, belonging is contingent upon performance; love is present, but it is unevenly distributed according to usefulness. Even Abuela Alma's care is shaped by fear—fear of loss, displacement and fragility—revealing how trauma transforms protection into control.

Together, Foucault and Mbembe illuminate how care in these films is inseparable from discipline. Love becomes a mechanism through which bodies and emotions are regulated, and trauma is perpetuated not through cruelty but through well-intentioned governance.

## 2.4 Posthuman Kinship and Eco-Cinematic Ethics

While biopolitics exposes the constraints of familial care, posthuman theory offers alternative ethical imaginaries. Donna Haraway's call to "make kin" challenges human exceptionalism by proposing kinship as an ethical practice that extends beyond bloodlines, species boundaries and biological reproduction (Haraway 103). Kinship, for Haraway, is about "response-ability"—the capacity to live responsibly within networks of interdependence (Haraway 34).

Both *Coco* and *Encanto* visualize such posthuman kinship through their animated worlds. Ancestral spirits, alebrijes, sentient houses and living landscapes are not decorative elements but active participants in memory and care. Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter helps articulate this agency, emphasizing that non-human entities possess the capacity to affect and be affected (Bennett 23). In *Encanto*, Casita responds emotionally to familial tension, cracking and collapsing as relationships fracture. In *Coco*, marigolds, bridges and spirit animals function as material conduits of memory and belonging.

Eco-cinema scholars argue that animation is uniquely suited to representing such more-than-human agency because it destabilizes rigid distinctions between the living and non-living, the natural and the supernatural. These films thus challenge anthropocentric and biomedical models of wellbeing by proposing healing as ecological, collective and ethically entangled. Memory is not stored solely in human minds but distributed across objects, spaces, songs and landscapes.

## III. *Coco* (2017): Postmemory, Ritual and the Biopolitics of Remembrance

Pixar's *Coco* offers a richly layered meditation on memory, family and survival, situating intergenerational trauma within an affective economy structured by remembrance and care. Drawing on the Mexican *Día de los Muertos* tradition, the film imagines memory not as a passive recollection of the past but as an active, life-sustaining force. Yet beneath its vibrant musicality and celebratory tone, *Coco* reveals a quieter narrative of inherited grief, familial control and emotional regulation. Through its depiction of postmemory, ritualized care and more-than-human agents, the film constructs a biopolitical world in which belonging is conditional and healing requires narrative disruption.

### 3.1 Memory as Survival: The Affective Economy of Remembrance

One of *Coco*'s most striking narrative conceits is its insistence that remembrance is a condition of existence. In the Land of the Dead, ancestral spirits persist only so long as they are remembered by the

living. The "Final Death" faced by forgotten spirits transforms memory into a biopolitical technology that governs life and death. As Michel Foucault argues, biopolitics operates through the management of life rather than the threat of violence alone, regulating populations by determining which lives are sustained and which are allowed to disappear (Foucault 138). In *Coco*, remembrance functions precisely in this way, producing an affective economy in which memory is both an ethical obligation and a survival mechanism.

Photographs, altars and rituals become material instruments of governance. The offend operates not merely as a site of mourning but as a technology that regulates access to the living world. Spirits whose images are absent are denied passage, reinforcing the idea that recognition is a prerequisite for continued existence. This system produces a moral hierarchy among the dead, privileging those whose lives have been narratively preserved. The film thus visualizes what Achille Mbembe describes as conditional life—existence granted only under specific relational and affective conditions (Mbembe 39).

This economy of remembrance resonates strongly with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Miguel's relationship to his ancestors is mediated entirely through stories, photographs and prohibitions rather than lived experience. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is sustained through "imaginative investment and affective creation," making it no less powerful than direct memory (Hirsch 5). In *Coco*, the absence of certain stories—particularly Héctor's erasure from family history—reveals how forgetting is not accidental but structured. Memory here is curated and this curation shapes both identity and belonging across generations.

### 3.2 Musical Silence and Inherited Trauma

At the heart of *Coco* lies a trauma that is neither violent nor spectacular but profoundly formative: Imelda Rivera's experience of abandonment. Her husband's departure to pursue music results in emotional rupture that calcifies into a family-wide ban on musical expression. This prohibition exemplifies how trauma, when unprocessed, becomes institutionalized within familial norms. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is often experienced belatedly, resurfacing through repetition rather than direct recollection (Caruth 4). In *Coco*, this repetition takes the form of inherited silence, where music —once associated with loss—becomes taboo.

Miguel's desire to play music thus positions him as a carrier of postmemory. Though he has no direct connection to Imelda's pain, he inherits its emotional residue, experiencing conflict and guilt without fully understanding its origin. Hirsch notes that postmemory often manifests through "structures of feeling" rather than explicit knowledge (Hirsch 33). Miguel's alienation within his family exemplifies this dynamic, as he struggles to articulate a desire that has been narratively foreclosed.

The song "Remember Me" functions as a crucial narrative device that exposes the instability of inherited memory. Initially presented as a celebratory anthem of fame, the song is gradually recontextualized as a lullaby rooted in care, tenderness and presence. This shift destabilizes the family's inherited narrative of abandonment, revealing that Héctor's absence was not a choice but a consequence of betrayal and erasure. Arthur Frank's assertion that healing requires the reconfiguration of dominant narratives is particularly relevant here; he argues that suffering persists when stories are silenced or misrepresented (Frank 75). By restoring the song's original context, *Coco* performs an act of narrative repair.

### 3.3 Care, Control and Familial Biopolitics

While the Rivera family's devotion to one another is unmistakable, *Coco* complicates idealized notions of care by revealing its regulatory dimensions. Care within the family is expressed through protection, tradition and discipline, particularly in the figure of Abuelita, whose fierce love enforces obedience. Michel Foucault emphasizes that modern power often operates through normalization rather than punishment, shaping behavior by defining what is acceptable and desirable (Foucault 144). In the Rivera household, care becomes a mechanism through which norms are internalized and deviations corrected.

Music is framed not merely as disobedience but as a threat to familial stability. Miguel's exclusion from musical expression illustrates how care can become conditional, extended only to those who conform. Rita Charon's concept of narrative medicine underscores the ethical cost of such conditional care, arguing that true recognition requires openness to stories that disrupt established norms (Charon 7). The family's initial refusal to hear Miguel's story perpetuates suffering, even as it is motivated by love.

Achille Mbembe's reflections on precarity further illuminate this dynamic. Mbembe argues that precarious lives are those that must continually justify their existence within systems of power (Mbembe 37). Miguel's position within the family is precarious precisely because his desire does not align with inherited values. His struggle reveals how familial care, when shaped by unresolved trauma, can reproduce vulnerability rather than alleviate it.

### 3.4 Posthuman Afterlives and More-Than-Human Kinship

Beyond its human characters, *Coco* constructs a posthuman world in which memory and care are distributed across a network of more-than-human agents. Alebrijes serve as spirit guides, embodying Donna Haraway's call to recognize multispecies kinship as an ethical practice rather than a metaphor (Haraway 103). These creatures do not merely assist the dead; they actively participate in processes of remembrance, protection and guidance.

Material elements such as marigold petals, bridges, and photographs function as what Jane Bennett terms "vibrant matter"—entities with the capacity to affect human lives and relationships (Bennett 23). The marigold bridge, in particular, operates as a liminal space where memory materializes into movement, enabling connection between worlds. Memory is thus not confined to human consciousness but embedded in ecological and material systems.

This posthuman framework challenges anthropocentric models of wellbeing by proposing healing as a collective, ecological process. Survival in *Coco* is not achieved through individual triumph but through relational belonging that extends across generations and species. As eco-cinema scholars note, animation's capacity to animate the inanimate allows for ethical imaginaries that foreground interdependence rather than mastery.

## IV. *Encanto* (2021): Productivity, Burnout and Magical Biopolitics of Care

Disney's *Encanto* presents a deceptively bright and musical portrait of family life that gradually reveals a complex structure of inherited trauma, emotional precarity, and biopolitical regulation. While the film outwardly celebrates communal harmony and magical abundance, it simultaneously exposes how care can become conditional, distributed unevenly according to productivity and usefulness. Unlike *Coco*, where memory governs survival beyond death, *Encanto* situates its biopolitical economy firmly within the living household. Magic functions as both gift and obligation, transforming family members into instruments of care whose worth is measured through performance. Through its portrayal of burnout, invisibility and narrative repair, *Encanto* offers a poignant critique of neoliberal ideals of productivity embedded within familial love.

### 4.1 The Miracle and Casita: Architecture of Regulation

At the heart of *Encanto* lies the Miracle, a supernatural force that grants each Madrigal family member a unique gift. While the Miracle is framed as benevolent, its operation closely resembles what Michel Foucault describes as a regulatory system that normalizes certain forms of life while marginalizing others (Foucault 144). Magical ability becomes the primary metric through which value is assigned, rendering bodies legible according to their utility to the family and community.

Casita, the sentient house, functions as both caretaker and surveillant. Its shifting floors, responsive walls and orchestrated domestic spaces create an environment of constant visibility. While Casita assists and protects, it also enforces order, ensuring that each family member remains aligned with their assigned role. Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" helps conceptualize Casita as an active participant in the biopolitical system rather than a neutral setting (Bennett 23). The house responds emotionally to familial harmony and discord, cracking under the pressure of unresolved trauma and affective overload.

This architectural regulation mirrors broader systems of soft governance, where control is exercised not through punishment but through care and responsiveness. The Madrigal home thus becomes an embodied manifestation of biopolitical care—loving, intimate and quietly disciplinary.

## 4.2 Foundational Trauma and Abuela Alma's Postmemory

The emotional logic governing the Madrigal household originates in Abuela Alma's foundational trauma: the violent displacement and loss of her husband during flight from conflict. Though the film refrains from specifying historical detail, this trauma operates as a primal scene that structures all subsequent familial expectations. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is particularly apt here, as Alma's unprocessed grief is transmitted to subsequent generations through emotional climate rather than explicit narration (Hirsch 5).

Abuela Alma's insistence on perfection, unity and productivity emerges not from cruelty but from fear —fear of loss, instability and fragility. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory often manifests through "affective pressure" rather than articulated knowledge (Hirsch 33). Alma's grandchildren inherit this pressure, internalizing a sense of responsibility for sustaining the Miracle without fully understanding its traumatic origins.

Achille Mbembe's reflections on precarity further illuminate Alma's leadership. Mbembe argues that precarious existence produces a constant need to secure life against perceived threats, often resulting in hyper-regulation (Mbembe 39). Alma's governance of the family reflects this logic: love becomes indistinguishable from control and care is mobilized to prevent imagined catastrophe. Trauma thus transforms protection into discipline, binding care to productivity.

## 4.3 Performing Bodies and the Affective Cost of Usefulness

Each Madrigal family member embodies a specific modality of care, translated into magical labor. Luisa's superhuman strength enables her to bear the physical burdens of the community, yet her song "Surface Pressure" reveals the emotional toll of being rendered indispensable. Her anxiety and exhaustion exemplify what Arthur Frank describes as the "tyranny of the restitution narrative," where bodies are valued only insofar as they continue to function (Frank 77). Luisa's worth is measured by endurance, leaving no space for vulnerability.

Isabela, celebrated for her aesthetic perfection, experiences a different form of biopolitical confinement. Her gift of creating flawless flowers becomes a mechanism of control, limiting her to beauty and compliance. Rita Charon's emphasis on narrative recognition underscores the ethical failure here: Isabela's suffering remains invisible because her story aligns too neatly with familial expectations (Charon 10). Only when she disrupts this narrative—creating wild, imperfect plants—does she begin to articulate an alternative selfhood.

Mirabel's position is the most overtly precarious. Lacking magical ability, she occupies a liminal space within the family, simultaneously loved and overlooked. Her non-performing body exposes the conditionality of care within the household. Mbembe's concept of conditional life is again instructive; Mirabel exists within the family but without the symbolic capital that secures belonging (Mbembe 37). Her invisibility reveals the violence embedded within systems that equate worth with productivity.

### 4.4 Narrative Disruption and Relational Healing

Unlike traditional heroic narratives, *Encanto* does not resolve its conflict through the restoration of magical power alone. Instead, healing emerges through narrative confrontation and relational recognition. Mirabel's role is not to acquire a gift but to listen, connect and articulate the stories that have been suppressed. Rita Charon argues that healing begins when stories are "received with attention, respect, and affiliation" (Charon 4). Mirabel embodies this ethic, bearing witness to the unspoken suffering of each family member.

The collapse of Casita symbolizes the breakdown of the biopolitical system that has governed the family. Significantly, the Miracle is restored not through obedience or sacrifice but through collective acknowledgment of trauma. Abuela Alma's confession and Mirabel's refusal to accept blame disrupt the inherited narrative of productivity as survival. Arthur Frank's insistence that suffering must be re-narrated to be transformed is realized here, as the family collectively reconstructs its story around care rather than utility (Frank 75).

In its final scenes, *Encanto* imagines a reconfigured kinship model where belonging is no longer contingent upon magical performance. The Miracle returns only after the family relinquishes its disciplinary grip, suggesting that care becomes ethical only when disentangled from governance.

### V. Posthuman Healing: Kinship Beyond Blood, Productivity and the Human

While *Coco* and *Encanto* differ in narrative structure, cultural context, and aesthetic style, both films converge in their reimagining of healing as a posthuman, collective and relational process. Neither film resolves trauma through individual mastery, biomedical cure, or exceptional heroism. Instead, they propose alternative ethics of care rooted in memory, recognition and multispecies kinship. By foregrounding non-human agents—ancestral spirits, sentient architecture, landscapes and material objects—these films challenge anthropocentric and neoliberal models of wellbeing that equate health with productivity, autonomy and control.

### 5.1 From Individual Resilience to Collective Survival

A defining feature of both *Coco* and *Encanto* is their refusal of the neoliberal narrative of individual resilience. In dominant cultural discourse, healing is often framed as personal strength, adaptability, or

self-optimization. Arthur Frank critiques this model, arguing that it obscures the relational nature of suffering and places the burden of recovery on isolated individuals (Frank 77). Both films resist this logic by situating trauma within familial and historical systems rather than personal inadequacy.

Miguel does not overcome hardship by asserting independence from his family; rather, healing occurs when the family's collective narrative is restructured to include suppressed histories. Similarly, Mirabel's lack of magical ability is not a deficit to be corrected but a condition that enables ethical listening and narrative repair. Her role underscores Rita Charon's claim that care emerges through "recognition and affiliation," not technical intervention (Charon 4). In both films, survival depends on relational recalibration rather than individual transformation.

### 5.2 Ecological Memory and More-Than-Human Care

Both films imagine memory as **ecologically distributed**, extending beyond human cognition into landscapes, objects and non-human beings. In *Coco*, marigold petals, spirit animals, bridges and photographs serve as conduits of remembrance, enabling movement between worlds. These elements exemplify Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," which emphasizes that agency is not exclusive to human subjects but emerges from assemblages of human and non-human forces (Bennett 23).

Similarly, *Encanto*'s Casita functions as a material archive of familial affect. Its walls crack under emotional strain and its collapse signifies not mere architectural failure but the breakdown of an unsustainable care regime. Donna Haraway's insistence on "making kin" across species and material forms provides a useful lens here, as kinship in these films extends to houses, landscapes and ancestral presences that actively participate in healing (Haraway 103). Care is thus rendered ecological rather than purely interpersonal.

### 5.3 Reconfiguring Kinship beyond Blood and Performance

Although both films center on biological families, they destabilize bloodline determinism by redefining kinship as an ethical practice rather than a genetic fact. Haraway argues that kinship must be understood as "an active process of becoming-with" rather than a fixed inheritance (Haraway 34). This framework illuminates how *Coco* and *Encanto* imagine family not as static lineage but as a mutable network sustained through care, listening, and responsibility.

In *Coco*, Héctor's recovery into family memory exemplifies this reconfiguration. Though biologically connected, he has been affectively disowned; his reintegration requires narrative justice rather than genetic proof alone. In *Encanto*, Mirabel's belonging is secured not through magical performance but through ethical labor—holding space for others' suffering. Achille Mbembe's reflections on conditional belonging are crucial here, as both films ultimately reject systems that render life valuable only when it is useful (Mbembe 37).

**5.4 Care After Biopolitics: Toward an Ethics of Interdependence**

Crucially, *Coco* and *Encanto* do not abandon care but transform it. Having exposed care as a potential mode of governance—one that disciplines bodies through love and duty—the films imagine what care might look like after biopolitical control is dismantled. Michel Foucault emphasizes that power is not eliminated but reconfigured; resistance, too, operates through rearticulation rather than rejection (Foucault 95). In both narratives, care survives only when decoupled from coercion and conditionality.

This post-biopolitical care is slower, messier and less productive. It allows for imperfection, vulnerability, and interdependence. Memory becomes a shared responsibility rather than a moral burden and kinship becomes an ethical commitment rather than a biological destiny. In this sense, the films align with eco-critical and posthuman ethics that emphasize coexistence over control and relation over mastery.

**5.5 Animation as a Posthuman Ethical Medium**

Animation plays a crucial role in enabling these posthuman imaginaries. By dissolving rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate, life and matter, animation creates ethical spaces where houses can feel, landscapes can remember and songs can heal. Scholars of eco-cinema argue that such aesthetic strategies allow viewers to perceive agency in unexpected forms, fostering ethical attunement to interdependence (Bennett 31).

Through their animated form, *Coco* and *Encanto* render visible the infrastructures of care that often remain invisible in realist cinema. Trauma becomes atmospheric, memory becomes spatial and healing becomes collective. These films thus contribute to an emerging corpus of cultural texts that challenge anthropocentric and biomedical paradigms of wellbeing, offering instead a vision of survival grounded in posthuman belonging.

**VI. Animation, Ethics and the Health Humanities**

Animation has often been relegated to the realm of entertainment or childhood pedagogy, yet contemporary animated cinema increasingly functions as a sophisticated medium for ethical inquiry. *Coco* and *Encanto* exemplify how animation can articulate complex experiences of trauma, care and relational vulnerability without relying on clinical discourse or realist aesthetics. Situated within the interdisciplinary field of health humanities, these films challenge dominant biomedical paradigms of wellbeing by foregrounding affective, narrative and ecological dimensions of suffering.

**6.1 Beyond Diagnosis: Animation and Non-Clinical Suffering**

A central contribution of *Coco* and *Encanto* lies in their refusal to pathologies emotional distress. Neither film names anxiety, depression, nor trauma in clinical terms, yet both vividly represent these

experiences through song, visual metaphor and narrative structure. Arthur Frank argues that biomedical models often reduce suffering to symptoms, thereby stripping it of narrative meaning (Frank 6). Animation, by contrast, enables what Frank describes as "moral storytelling," where suffering is understood through lived experience rather than diagnostic categorization (Frank 22).

Luisa's physical collapse in *Encanto* and Miguel's sense of existential erasure in *Coco* are rendered legible not through medical intervention but through expressive form—music, color, spatial distortion and rhythm. Such aesthetic strategies align with health humanities' emphasis on recognizing suffering as relational and culturally embedded rather than clinically isolated (Charon 10). By situating distress within family systems and historical inheritance, these films model an ethics of care grounded in attention and recognition.

### 6.2 Narrative Ethics and the Work of Listening

Health humanities scholarship places particular emphasis on listening as an ethical practice. Rita Charon contends that narrative competence—the ability to attend to, interpret and be moved by others' stories—is foundational to ethical care (Charon 4). Both *Coco* and *Encanto* dramatize this principle through protagonists who heal not by fixing but by listening.

Miguel's journey involves uncovering silenced histories and restoring narrative justice to Héctor's life. Mirabel's labor is similarly narrative: she listens to Luisa's anxiety, Isabela's frustration and Abuela Alma's grief without attempting to instrumentalize their pain. These moments foreground what Charon describes as "affiliation," an ethical stance that resists dominance and acknowledges vulnerability (Charon 7). Animation enhances this ethical listening by externalizing interior states, allowing viewers to witness emotions that might otherwise remain invisible.

### 6.3 Affect, Atmosphere and Ecological Ethics

Animation also excels at representing affective atmospheres—emotional conditions that exceed individual psychology. Scholars of affect theory note that emotions circulate across bodies, spaces and objects rather than residing solely within individuals. In *Coco*, memory permeates the environment: bridges glow, photographs shimmer and music reverberates across worlds. In *Encanto*, emotional tension literally cracks walls and destabilizes architecture.

Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" offers a framework for understanding these animated affects as ethically significant (Bennett 31). By attributing agency to non-human entities, animation cultivates ecological attentiveness, encouraging viewers to recognize how environments participate in care and harm. Donna Haraway's call to remain "with the trouble" rather than seek tidy resolutions resonates strongly here, as both films depict healing as an ongoing, collective process rather than a definitive cure (Haraway 1).

### 6.4 Children's Cinema as Ethical Pedagogy

As family-oriented films, *Coco* and *Encanto* also function pedagogically, introducing younger audiences to complex ethical questions surrounding memory, responsibility and care. Yet their ethical work extends beyond didacticism. By presenting trauma as relational rather than exceptional, these films normalize vulnerability and interdependence, countering cultural narratives that equate strength with self-sufficiency.

This pedagogical dimension is particularly significant within health humanities, which seeks to cultivate empathy, ethical imagination and narrative awareness across disciplines. The films invite viewers to reflect on how families transmit both care and harm, how love can discipline as well as sustain and how healing requires collective accountability. In doing so, they expand the scope of health humanities beyond clinical settings into domestic, cultural, and ecological spaces.

### 6.5 Animation and the Future of Care Ethics

Ultimately, *Coco* and *Encanto* demonstrate how animation can function as a laboratory for ethical experimentation. By animating memory, care, and kinship beyond the human, these films imagine futures in which wellbeing is understood as interdependent and ethically entangled. Michel Foucault's insight that ethics involves the continuous reworking of relationships rather than adherence to fixed norms is particularly relevant here (Foucault 28).

Through their aesthetic and narrative choices, *Coco* and *Encanto* propose care as an ongoing practice of attention, listening, and coexistence—one that resists productivity-driven models of health and embraces relational vulnerability. In this sense, animated cinema emerges not as escapism but as a critical space for rethinking how societies remember, care and heal.

### Conclusion: Remembering Otherwise—Care, Kinship and Posthuman Survival

*Coco* and *Encanto* offer more than affectively rich animated narratives of family and belonging; they function as ethical meditations on how trauma, care and survival are negotiated across generations within precarious social and ecological worlds. Through their attention to inherited grief, silenced histories, and uneven economies of care, both films reveal how family operates simultaneously as a site of protection and regulation. Trauma in these narratives is neither singular nor spectacular; it lingers quietly within rituals, expectations and affective atmospheres, shaping lives long after its originating moment has faded from direct memory.

Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, this paper has shown how both films dramatize the transmission of unresolved loss through emotional climates rather than explicit narration. Miguel and Mirabel inherit obligations they did not choose, yet are compelled to manage the afterlives of

trauma within their respective families. Their struggles illuminate how postmemory structures identity not through historical knowledge alone but through embodied feeling, silence and responsibility. In this sense, *Coco* and *Encanto* challenge dominant representations of trauma by foregrounding its domestic, intergenerational and relational dimensions.

Situating these narratives within the frameworks of health humanities further reveals how suffering in both films resists biomedical categorization. Drawing on Arthur Frank and Rita Charon, the analysis has demonstrated that grief, anxiety and burnout are portrayed not as individual pathologies but as shared conditions produced within familial systems of care. Healing emerges not through cure or correction but through narrative recognition—through listening, acknowledgment and the ethical labor of making space for silenced stories. These films thus critique neoliberal models of wellbeing that privilege productivity, resilience and self-sufficiency, offering instead an ethics of vulnerability and relational dependence.

At the same time, the paper has argued that care in *Coco* and *Encanto* is inseparable from power. Through Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's reflections on precarity, family emerges as a subtle regulatory structure that disciplines bodies and emotions through love, duty and tradition. In *Coco*, remembrance functions as a condition of survival, producing an affective economy in which forgetting results in ontological erasure. In *Encanto*, magical productivity becomes the measure of worth, rendering non-performing bodies invisible and precarious. Care, in both cases, operates as a form of soft governance, revealing how even nurturing institutions can reproduce vulnerability when shaped by unresolved trauma.

Crucially, however, neither film remains trapped within these disciplinary structures. By extending the analysis into posthuman and eco-critical frameworks, this paper has shown how *Coco* and *Encanto* imagine alternative modes of healing grounded in multispecies kinship and ecological interdependence. Drawing on Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, the films foreground more-than-human agents—ancestral spirits, sentient homes, living landscapes and vibrant matter—as active participants in memory and care. Healing becomes a collective, ecological process rather than an individual achievement, distributed across humans, non-humans and material environments.

Animation plays a central role in enabling these ethical imaginaries. By destabilizing boundaries between the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead, animation renders visible the infrastructures of care that often remain invisible in realist cinema. Songs remember, houses feel, landscapes mourn, and objects carry affective weight. In doing so, *Coco* and *Encanto* position animated cinema as a vital site for health humanities, capable of articulating forms of suffering and care that elude clinical language and anthropocentric frameworks.

*Coco* and *Encanto* imagine survival not through mastery, productivity, or exceptionalism, but through collective memory, relational care, and posthuman belonging. They invite viewers to remember otherwise—to approach family not merely as a site of inheritance but as an ethical practice that must continually be renegotiated in response to trauma, vulnerability and interdependence. In foregrounding care as both a risk and a possibility, these films offer a compelling vision of healing grounded in responsibility, recognition and the fragile work of making kin in a wounded world.

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