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Richard Francaviglia

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Contextualizing a Latin American Music Video: Natalia Lafourcade's "Nunca es Suficiente"

Richard Francaviglia
University of Texas at Arlington

Last year, while researching the geographical roots of popular "*salsa*" music heard throughout Latin America, I encountered a *cumbia*-influenced version of a song titled "Nunca es Suficiente." I knew that the original version of this love song by Mexican singer-songwriter Natalia Lafourcade was a bit up-tempo, but wondered how it would sound when given an even more lively *cumbia* treatment. For those unfamiliar with the term *cumbia*, it is a musical style that features a distinctive Latin American beat and melodic incorporation of percussion, vocals, and other instrumentation. If that definition seems a bit vague, I suggest listening to some songs in that genre, which will give you a good idea of how it sounds and feels. Your first reaction—unless you do not have a pulse—is to embrace the rhythm and almost involuntarily sway to it. *Cumbia* is one of those musical genres that persuades on two levels: it simultaneously invites one to listen and to dance. That explains why the best way to understand it is to *experience* it firsthand.

Regarding *cumbia*'s geographical origins, there is considerable speculation and disagreement. Most claim it originated in Colombia, while others may simply say "the Caribbean." As to cultural origins, the safest bet is a combination of Indigenous, Spanish, and African—no surprise, since all three cultures have played a major role in the region's history. In fact, some claim that the word *cumbia* itself derives from African roots, *cumbe* meaning to dance in several languages in the western part of that continent. Others suggest that it means "to party" in a number of Caribbean dialects. In either case, *cumbia* involves a physical and even sensual engagement with one's surroundings. As a friend from Panama put it, "With *cumbia*, you hear and feel the music—which is very liberating."

The phenomenal spread of *cumbia* in Latin America is noteworthy. In a region of tremendous musical diversity—folk music styles as well as more elite musical traditions—this rhythm-driven genre seems to know no bor-

ders. Although *cumbia* may have originated about three hundred years ago (or more) in one part of Latin America, in more recent years it has become one of the defining aspects of a broader regional cultural identity. There is no question that it has found its way into all of Latin America in the past fifty years or so. As a Pacific Coast-oriented geographer, I've heard it playing on radio, television, and other devices from Baja California way down into South America. In fact, when I first noticed versions of it in 1992, I was in the Pacific port of Guayaquil, Ecuador, and thought its Caribbean quality sounded a bit out of place, but nevertheless very delightful. As I later traveled south along the foothills of the central Andes, *cumbia* seemed to have caught on there as well. In my most recent studies focusing on South America's arid west coast, I noticed that it had even found a home in string bean-shaped Chile, from locales as remote as the Atacama Desert in the country's far north to its populous heart in the vicinity of Valparaíso and Santiago.

From the U.S.-Mexican border to Tierra del Fuego is an impressive geographical range, indeed; moreover, the growing popularity of *cumbia* in the United States confirms its broad appeal, not only among Latinos but among increasing numbers of gringos as well. That said, I should note that even within Latin America, there appear to be some regional variations in *cumbia* that may depend on earlier local styles that may also determine its rates of acceptance. To understand more about this, however, one would have to conduct research very quickly, since things are changing so rapidly. I should note that I was not consciously studying music on my trips to Latin America, with my main interest being cultural landscapes. Rather, I've enjoyed listening to it as the soundtrack to which people live their daily and nightly lives. One thing has now become clear to me: *cumbia* is a popular culture phenomenon linked to the flourishing of radio and other electronic communications since the mid-twentieth century, and it shows no signs of slowing down.

So how does Natalia Lafourcade and her song "Nunca es Suficiente" fit into this broader context? Born in 1984, with her full name being María Natalia Lafourcade Silva, she too has an international backstory. As the name Lafourcade implies, there is a French connection through her father's side of the family. Although born and raised in Mexico, Natalia has broader roots in Latin America, as her father hails from Chile but settled in Mexico. Both of her parents (Gastón Lafourcade and María Silva) are accomplished musicians, and her uncle Enrique Lafourcade was a famous Chilean writer

in the 1950s. Given Natalia's considerable musical and literary talent, it is clear that the apple did not fall far from the tree.

Having contextualized this musical genre and the musician involved, I shall now discuss the song "Nunca es Suficiente" itself. The original dates from 2014, and it involved a collaborator: Natalia's fellow Mexican musician Daniela Azpiasu is listed as co-composer. The song's first two lines—which translate as "never is sufficient for me because I always want more from you"—are as enigmatic as the song title itself. They might suggest the singer's insatiability, but it soon becomes apparent that she is demanding something else. For her, never is enough when it comes to the kind of insincerity her lover is bringing to the relationship. Evidently, this is the first (or at least the most important) love in the singer's life. However, she feels it is just another affair for her lover, who is far more experienced but "playing at love" rather than really in it. Building her case, Natalia recites a litany of thoughtless things her lover is doing. As with many songs in which one lover makes demands on another, this one insists on behavioral change, with no assurance of a successful outcome. Seemingly unconcerned about the pitfalls, she is clearly undeterred, and even more strongly if not stubbornly makes her case in each line.

There are currently two video versions of this song by Natalia on YouTube. In the first, which dates from 2015, she sings it rather softly, and it is backed by a polka-like rhythm that brings to mind *conjunto* music from the 1980s. That earlier music video version is a pantomime-like dramatization of the song's content. In it, Natalia interacts with her lover, embracing him at times and exploding in anger at others in scenes that are seemingly obligatory for audiences expecting Latin American soap opera-like reenactments. Some critics characterize this type of acted video as a "narrative," but I think *Music Dramatization Videos* (MDVs) is more accurate. In the nearly five years this video has been online (that is, as of February 3, 2020), it registered a total of 101,666,212 hits.

However, in this review I shall discuss in far more detail an even more popular video of this song, the *cumbia* version produced in 2018. Like *cumbia* itself, the production of this video has a far-flung international dimension. Some of its final production occurred in Cabo San Lucas (Mexico) and even Texas, and one of its producers hails from Argentina. Although released just two years ago, it has already garnered more than eight times as many hits, a phenomenal 852,995,344. As of this writing, it can be found by Googling *YouTube Natalia Lafourcade y Los Angeles Azules*. That group, whose name

translates as The Blue Angels, is a venerable Mexican ensemble. They have been around for decades, and have changed over time, but still rely on fine talent playing varied instruments and vocal backup. Because the group incorporates distinctive percussion, other instruments such as organs, and especially synthesizers, their subgenre is called *cumbia sonidera*. In Spanish, a *sonidero* is a disc jockey, or DJ. As one might imagine, the goal of sonidera is getting people to fully experience the music through technology.

If accurate, the viewing figures from YouTube mentioned above confirm that the original version of this song has been spectacularly eclipsed by its successor. At this point I would like to discuss *why* this has occurred. In my opinion, this *cumbia* version perfectly captures the energetic cross-genre fusion of Latin American musical styles. To begin with, it astutely uses *place* to subliminally suggest its Latin American authenticity. As wording on the video states, it was shot on location at Puerto de Progreso, Yucatán (Mexico). This coastal port on the southern shore of the Gulf of Mexico is geographically and metaphorically perfect for the intersection of Caribbean *cumbia* with popular mainland Mexican music. Whereas the first video version of this song was shot in gloomy, almost claustrophobic interiors that could be anywhere, this *cumbia* version is outdoors and feels as expansive as Latin America's sprawling geography.

The producers used Progreso's coastal setting to advantage, as did the director. After some shots of the Gulf of Mexico, and then a palm tree stirred by breezes and a flock of gulls flying above, the camera sweeps back to the shoreline crowded by people. So far, there has been almost no sound, but that soon changes. A musical event is getting underway as the crowd roars, making it clear that this will be a concert performance, not a dramatization of the song set to background music. The video, which has a documentary feel, is all about the music. I agree with those who would characterize this one as a *Music Performance Video* (MPV), as its goal is to engage viewers as concert goers rather than as voyeurs.

Throughout, this energetic MPV version has a different kind of synergy than the earlier dramatized video, in part because it is a collaboration between an individual singer and a group. Musically, it begins with a *cumbia* beat, then quickly swings to an impressive trumpet solo played almost mariachi-style, a solo as smooth as glass and musically complex enough to immediately grab one's interest. After that musical introduction, Natalia comes on camera and soon swings into her signature song, whose *cumbia* accompaniment brings it to a new level, actually transforming it into a

very different musical experience. In places, the subtle use of a Moog-like synthesizer gives this version an almost otherworldly quality.

Rather ingeniously, this video plays tricks with time. It gives the impression that the song is being performed in one take, but filming evidently covered several hours, for it begins in late afternoon and ends as night has fallen. Although the tropics are known for their short sunsets, this one seems miraculous, as it occurs over just about three minutes! However, that compression of time is fortunate because it actually lends a magical quality to the video. In a few scenes, the apparent use of drone- (or boom/crane-) mounted cameras captures the onstage action from above, adding a third dimension to the festive experience underway.

This song has some very thought-provoking messages. Although the lyrics are essentially the same in both video versions, they have different meanings in the way Natalia presents them. In the performance video, rather than the dramatic video, we now focus only on Natalia, not her lover—an abstract touch that helps liberate the song. In this version, her more passionate delivery of the lyrics makes it clear she has nothing, and everything, to lose. In a more public concert setting, "Nunca es Suficiente" becomes a protest song about the insensitivities of a selfish lover. When shared so openly and personally, it amounts to an anthem for others who find themselves similarly (mis)treated. The women in the audience clearly identify with Natalia, and are shown singing in synch with her. However tempting it might be to regard this version of the song as a feminist manifesto—yet another exposé of a guy being a jerk (as appears to be the case in her earlier dramatic video)—it now has an even more universal message of liberation. With no actual lover on screen, Natalia (or anyone else) could be singing this song to any lover of any gender, or maybe even one claiming no gender at all. In that case, the desperation and hope in this song's message would be applicable to anyone, which is to say everyone, regardless of sexual identity or preference.

This *cumbia* version is a *tour de force* delivery. It is a joy to watch Natalia coordinating her body language and the tone of her voice. From verse to verse—and sometimes within individual verses themselves—she is emotionally up and down, alternately upbeat and very bluesy. Clearly, she is an accomplished performer who literally owns this song, and relishes bringing it to a new audience in this new format. Natalia sings so articulately—and the video's sound engineers let her voice rise above the enthusiastic Blue Angels so effectively—that each verse invites careful scrutiny. Some of her phrases are poetic, and this adds to the song's literary quality. From the beginning

to the end of this song, Natalia's love of words is evident. Her ability to playfully mix shorter/simple and longer/complex words—sometimes in the same line—is remarkable. That is true in all versions, but it is simply captivating to watch her perform it rather than act along with it.

Natalia is a wordsmith who can forge lyrics into varied rhythms. In this song, the phrase "nunca es suficiente" could be drawn out, but she makes good use of a contraction (as is sometimes often done in popular speech) and pronounces it as "nunca e suficiente"—effectively skipping a beat. And yet, elsewhere she takes full advantage of the *cumbia* beat to articulate and even fragment the single word "*incondicional*" (unconditional) into syllables, taking about two full seconds to almost pedantically spell it out as "in-con-di-cio-nal." It is almost as if she is saying *this is the way you use this word when you want to emphasize how passionately you feel about something.* As she makes some points, she raises her arm in a gesture of strength that encourages solidarity.

Throughout this song, Natalia's pronunciation is so crisp, and her words so interconnected, that I marvel at how much content they convey. Listening to this song carefully makes one aware of the difference between enunciation and pronunciation. For example, the unusual way Natalia trills the letter "r' in the phrase "*te enredas…*" (you get tangled up…) is downright sassy, if not subversive. I can envision someone teaching Spanish—and who wouldn't want to learn it after experiencing this version of the song?—encouraging their students to emulate Natalia's diction. That same teacher might also use Natalia's performance as an example of the ways in which a speaker can creatively bend, or even break, the rules to great artistic advantage.

Although some almost word-for-word English translations of this song are available online, I feel that they (as with many hastily created movie subtitles) often miss deeper and more complex meanings such as those that abound in this song. Consider one of several evocative phrases, "*ilusiones vagabundas*." One translator claims it means "vague illusions," but it could have other meanings as well. In Spanish, as commonly understood, the noun *ilusión* can mean not only a visual illusion (a deceiving sight, such as a mirage), but also hope or anticipation; moreover, it can also refer to a thrill or pleasure. As if that were not confounding enough, the adjective *vagabunda* that modifies ilusión can literally refer to something or someone who is a vagabond or a vagrant, that is, one who seems to call no place home. However, vagabunda in this case could also mean wandering or roving, and perhaps more imaginatively as fleeting or ephemeral. I've been taking my

time translating, and deconstructing, this song's delightful lyrics and content, and I continue to be amazed by how many meanings can be teased out of it.

This is a surprisingly complex piece of music. In one viewing, I listened to the chord changes alone to see how they influence the mood of this song, and was awed by how effectively they function. Two musical genres are working overtime here. One is the format of a traditional love song, which invites introspection, and the other is the *cumbia* treatment that makes one move almost involuntarily. Natalia herself can't keep still on stage. In one high-angle shot rotating like a slow-moving hurricane seen from a satellite, she (and her tempestuous sentiments) is the eye of that tropical storm. And yet there is so much going on that draws one back to introspection, if not analysis. For example, I wonder how many listeners realize that the opening tune flowing from the horn of that talented young trumpeter is actually based on the original song's structural underpinnings—that delightfully varied combination of tune and lyrics that Natalia uses on six separate occasions during the video. As these lines soar above the bass *cumbia* rhythm, they reveal why the original tune inevitably became a huge hit single—and why this version is destined to soon have a *billion* hits online.

As songs go, "Nunca es Suficiente" is both traditional and remarkably adaptable. A few days ago, I found myself whistling it and appreciating the full richness of its cascading notes. I first whistled it much as it is on the video(s), but then discovered something remarkable as I played with the timing. When I slowed it down, the song became even more wistful. I could imagine it being at home in 1950, when the heartbreaking love song "No Me Quieras Tanto" was popularized in the Mexican film of the same name. In my opinion, "Nunca es Suficiente" is one of the best Latin American romantic songs ever written, and there have been many, particularly about love going off the rails. It is so well composed, and so versatile, that it seems destined to become one of those standards or "classics" covered by performers well into the future.

If and when that comes to pass, *place* as well as *time* will play a role in the process—yet another reminder that history and geography are inseparable.