

# Nepantla, Cross-cultural Encounters, and Literature: Latin America, India, Japan

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**Michael Palencia-Roth**

University of Illinois, USA

Reitaku University, Japan

## Abstract

This essay briefly explores the phenomenon of nepantla in three representative cross-cultural encounters, in both initial and later phases: Spain-Latin America, England-India, and the West-Japan. Nepantla is a mode of in-betweenness rooted in the historical encounter between cultures and leading to mediation of various kinds. For Latin America, the essay focuses on Columbus, the Cortés-Moctezuma encounter, the Aztec-Franciscan dialogues of 1524, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa. For India, the essay comments on the East India Company, English education in India, Lord Macaulay, Dean Mahomet, Rabindranath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and a number of other writers from the early, mid and late twentieth century. For Japan, the essay considers, first, Japanese reactions to missionary activities in the sixteenth century, then the opening up of Japan in the nineteenth century, the Meiji Restoration and its literature, and in particular authors like Fukuzawa, Sōseki, Endō, Kawabata, and Ōe. The essay argues, finally, that nepantla is a useful and dynamic approach to intercultural encounters that complements approaches indicated by terms like colonialism, imperialism, contact zones, hybridity or métissage, liminality, de-colonization, or post-coloniality.

“Nepantla [h]” = “in the middle of something/en el medio, en medio, o por el medio.”

“Nepan” = “This appears only as an element of compounds or derivations and conveys a sense of mutuality or reciprocity.” (Karttunen, 1992: 169)

## Introduction

In his monumental history of Nueva España or present-day Mexico, Diego Durán, sixteenth-century Dominican friar and speaker of Nahuatl, describes a conversation which I consider iconic for what it suggests about cross-cultural encounters, what the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin might call “encounter chronotopes.” Having just been criticized for his “foolish behavior,” the Indian

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### Corresponding author:

Michael Palencia-Roth, University of Illinois, 3072 Foreign Languages Building, MC-160, 707 S. Mathews Ave, Urbana, IL 61801, USA.

Email: palencia@illinois.edu

– an Aztec – justifies it by saying that he is “still *nepantla*.” He understands that the term means “in the middle,” Durán answers, but he wants a further explanation. The Indian responds: since they are not yet rooted in the faith, they are “governed by neither one religion nor the other ... They believe in [the Christian] God and also follow their ancient heathen [sic] rites and customs” (Durán, 1967: 237). The term can therefore refer both to a condition and to a transitional process.

In recent years, the term “*nepantla*” has been used to point to possible strategies of resistance and survival by people living in borderland spaces. In *Borderlands* (1987), *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002), and other works, Gloria Anzaldúa famously linked it to Chicana literature and to identity studies. *Nepantla* is the title of a recent journal of queer studies. But the term is potentially broader than these uses of it might suggest: it can focus critical attention on cross-cultural encounters in general, on the consciousness that informs such encounters, and especially on the reactions to them, including evidence from written documents, my particular interest in this essay.

Not all cross-cultural encounters, real or imagined, are the same, but at some point, especially toward the beginning, they all possess a similar binary structure generally described by Michel de Certeau, Johannes Fabian, Emmanuel Levinas and others as that of alterity. Such binaries include self versus other, this versus that, or subject versus object. An alterity can remain static and oppositional, exemplifying, in effect, identity politics. Or, it can become active and relational through the mediating presence and actions of the middle, the in-betweenness, in sum, *nepantla*. *Nepantla* is sometimes akin to translation, to the transformation of difference into a version of the same. Or it may be the source of creativity and the space of imaginative and interpretive thought, of mediation, of the experience of the new, of the language that reflects and alters consciousness. If experienced as permanent, it may lead to despair.

In the West, the awareness of in-betweenness is as old as literature and thought. We need only recall episodes in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus asks (in Book 9) what race of men a certain land contains and whether or not they possess the civilized practices of law, agriculture, and tradition. From the vantage point of his ship offshore, he cannot directly know this Other, this alterity; such knowledge can be attained only when he leaves the safety of his vessel and enters the Other’s world. In the cave of the Cyclops, Odysseus experiences in-betweenness, however briefly, suspended between life and death. But his consciousness is not changed by the experience. He leaves the Cyclops’ world having affirmed its barbaric difference from his own, civilized culture. The “barbarian” is the first construct of identity consciousness. In another field, without reference to cultural issues and with a nuanced awareness of the complexities of alterity, Plato advocates, in *The Republic*, the mediation between opposites (justice and injustice, light and dark etc.) as the best instrument for obtaining truth. This is the Platonic dialectic. Whether a particular in-betweenness is fixed or fluid makes all the difference in the kind of text or document that is produced.

*Nepantla* is a mode of in-betweenness rooted in the historical encounter between cultures; it occurs primarily in the persons or societies being encountered rather than in the conquering, colonizing, or invading culture. Consequently, I limit my discussion to situations in which a personal, cultural, or aesthetic identity may come into question as a direct consequence of one or more cross-cultural encounters. I explore three representative and exemplary cross-cultural encounters: Spain and Latin America, England and India, the West and Japan. It is my hope that this essay can be used as a springboard or point of reference for the analysis of *nepantla* in other encounters as well, for example, Japan in Taiwan; France, Portugal, England, Italy, and Germany in Africa; Russia in Central Asia and the Far East.<sup>1</sup> It has often been said that history is written by the victors. *Nepantla* history is told neither from the perspective of the victor nor from that of the victim. It is the story of what happens between them, of the mediating strategies occasioned by their encounter. *Nepantla* is therefore central to the poetics of mediation discussed, but not identified as such, in *L’Oeil en main: Pour une poétique de la médiation* by Daniel-Henri Pageaux.

## Latin America

To the day Christopher Columbus died, he believed that in 1492 he had reached the outer borders of the East. Therefore, though he was at times puzzled by what he found, as well as by what he did not find, he himself was never in *nepantla*; never, that is, in an ambivalent, in-between state. Much like Odysseus viewing the island of the Cyclops, Columbus knew where he came from and where he would return. Neither his frame of reference nor his cultural values were substantially altered by experience. His European and Christian axiology shaped his reactions to the New World people. As evident in the Diary of the first voyage, Columbus was confident of the superiority of his culture and faith; he was certain of the childlike ignorance of the people he had just encountered. His confident language combined mercantilism with evangelization (Colón, 1982a: 30). A similar discourse of mercantilism and evangelization is evident in the early history of encounters following Vasco da Gama in India and Francis Xavier in Japan. Columbus's worldview was disturbed only when his expectations were NOT met. Thus, as he stated in his report to Santangel of 1493, "on these islands, up to this point, I have not found monstrous men, as many had expected."<sup>2</sup> These would be anthropophagoi, "known" to western literature to reside in the unexplored and unfamiliar regions of the world since the time of Homer. The expectation of finding cannibals would provide the Spanish with one of the ex post facto justifications for colonizing the New World and enslaving many of its people.

In 1492, the *nepantla* moment on the part of the Indians is so brief, and so filtered through the Spanish language, that it almost escapes notice. Both in the letter to Santangel and in the diary entry of October 14th, Columbus wrote that the "Indians," on seeing him, cried out to each other, "Come and see the people who came from heaven. Bring them food and drink."<sup>3</sup> Just how Columbus could have understood the Indians with such quoted precision is a mystery. Unsettled as they were by the sudden appearance of these supposed extra-terrestrials, the Indians, nonetheless, treated them hospitably, little dreaming that their world eventually would be destroyed.

We have a much more detailed record of the indigenous reactions to the Spanish invaders in the case of the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan. It was compiled, to be sure, under the direction of the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún. But it was the result of extensive collaboration and, written in Nahuatl with a facing Spanish translation or paraphrase, it is as close as we are likely to come to the indigenous view of the Spaniards.

In 1519, as described in the *Florentine Codex*, first there was fear.

Moctezuma fainted when his messengers told him about the Spaniards' floating islands [ships], about the thunder that came from a stick, about its round pebble that could pulverize a tree. He was frightened by the iron that covered the Spaniards from head to toe. They rode deers [horses] which were as tall as houses. Their faces were very white; they had eyes like chalk and yellow hair. Their food was large, white and like straw (Sahagún, 1955: 19–20). Moctezuma sent emissaries, magicians, and soothsayers to stop the Spaniards' progress toward his capital (Sahagún, 1955: 21–23). But nothing worked, not even the food that he sent, sprinkled with sacrificial human blood.

On November 8, 1519, Cortés and Moctezuma formally and ceremoniously met in Tenochtitlan. Each side documented this meeting. Cortés cunningly represented himself, he boasted to his king in the so-called "Second Letter," as the god, or an emissary of the god, that the Aztecs had been expecting, Quetzalcoatl, fitting his mission into the Aztec apocalyptic tradition and rhetorically transforming Moctezuma into a loyal "vassal" of the Spanish Crown (Cortés, 1986: 84ff). According to the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún, 1955: 41–43), Moctezuma received Cortés graciously, saying that he had long been anticipating his predicted arrival. He invited Cortés to rest after his long journey (Sahagún, 1955: 42). Then, as described in the Nahuatl text, Cortés, through his go-between doña Marina, addressed Moctezuma "in a barbarous tongue" and a "strange language," assuring

him that he should “quiet his heart and be not frightened.” Then the Spaniards took him captive (Sahagún, 1955: 42–43) and Moctezuma’s people abandoned him. In Cortés’s account, the imprisonment of Moctezuma began six days later, and was undertaken for the sole purpose of protecting him (Cortés, 1986: 88).

As scholars have frequently noted, this cordial dialogue was based on misunderstandings that the Spaniards exploited, effectively defeating the Aztecs from the start and thrusting them into the *nepantla* which Diego Durán would speak of years later. The defeat, however, was contested during a debate between Aztec elders or wise men (known in Nahuatl as *tlamatinime*) and Franciscan friars. For the Aztecs, the debate was a desperate attempt at both accommodation and resistance from the place of *nepantla*. For their part, the friars made rhetorical concessions to Aztec cosmology as part of their evangelizing strategy. The debate is recorded in a document known as “The Aztec-Franciscan Dialogues of 1524” in English and in Spanish as “Coloquios y doctrina christiana.” The *Coloquios*, housed in the Vatican archives and forgotten until the 1920s, is a bilingual text, presented in Nahuatl and Spanish. It contains linguistically hybrid moments of in-betweenness in which Spanish becomes part of the Nahuatl, or Nahuatl part of the Spanish. Of particular interest are those moments in which the Franciscans use Nahuatl to explain Christian doctrine or to “correct” native understanding, as well as those moments of Aztec resistance.

This, as translated from Nahuatl into English by Jorge Klor de Alva, is how the *Coloquios* begins:

Nican vmpeva yn temachtiliz tlatolli

*Here begins the word which instructs,*

Yn jtoca Doctrina christiana

*Its name: Christian Doctrine*

Yn omachtiloque njcan yanguic españa tlaca

*This one which they were taught here, the men of New Spain.*

In oquinmachtique

*They taught them,*

In matlactin onome Sanct Francisco Padreme

*The twelve fathers of Saint Francis*

(Klor de Alva, 1980: 56)

Throughout the dialogue, certain Spanish words appear verbatim in the Nahuatl text, either singly or in combination with Nahuatl words. Thus, for example, “New Spain” (today’s Mexico) is “yanguic españa,” “yanguic” meaning “new” in Nahuatl. The term “padre” or “father” is pluralized with -me in the Nahuatl: *Padreme*. Later in the dialogue, other inserted Spanish terms include *Indias occidentales*, *Emperador*, *patriarcas*, *profetas*, *Rey de España*, *cardenales*, *Roma*.

The most contested term in the dialogue is “God” or “Dios.” Sometimes, the term appears untranslated; at other times it appears as “teutle” or “lord.” *Teutle*, *teutl*, and *teuctli* all refer to the giver of life and possessor of earth and sky. *Teutle*’s name is “Ypalnemoani,” defined in the *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* as “the one through whom living goes on; the giver of life; God” (Karttunen, 1992: 107). *Ypalnemoani* may be “God,” the Franciscans said, but he is a false god. The only true God is the Christian God, Jesus Christ, who is merciful and loving. Therefore, the Franciscans said, you must throw out all your gods and spit on them. If you acknowledge Jesus Christ, you will be saved (Sahagún, 1986: 85).

Before withdrawing for the evening, the Aztecs briefly countered, admitting that the Aztec gods might have different names but that nonetheless they have guided the Aztecs with wisdom and given them their calendars, religious festivals, and doctrines. The next day the Aztec returned in a more intransigent mood. Accusing the Franciscans of making scandalous remarks about *Ypalmemoani*, they defended their faith again, finally declaring themselves to be unpersuaded by the Franciscans' arguments and even injured by them. At this point, the Franciscans reminded the Aztecs of the *requerimiento* and its threats (Sahagún, 1986: 90).<sup>4</sup> They then explained Christian doctrine further and retold stories of the creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel. At this point the text breaks off and the rest has been lost. We don't know how the Aztecs responded to these arguments or whether they responded at all. Of course, no response would have been effective. The dialogue was a dialogue in name only, for the Franciscans demanded faith, acceptance, and obedience.

The Aztec-Franciscan dialogues are unique in Spanish-American literature. A briefer though similar exchange has been documented concerning a voyage made in Brazil in 1613 by Father Yves d'Evreux to Tupinamba tribes. Responding to doctrinal statements by the Capuchins, the wise men of the Tupinamba asked how, if God is immortal, it is possible that he should die; why, if God is all powerful, the devil has not been completely defeated; how, if God has to die and save mankind through his blood (the eucharist), could he have enough blood for all the people of the world? The Capuchins, as did the Franciscans earlier, lost patience and called the Tupinamba "obtuse" for not understanding the subtleties of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Much more can be said, of course, about *nepantla*, about linguistic, mental, and even literary hybridity, not to mention actual race mixture, in the colonial period in Latin America, but that would lengthen this essay far beyond the permitted limits. A discussion concerning race mixture, for example, might point to laws and recommendations from the Crown, which evolved over decades, or to works by El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala in Peruvian literature. The most pervasive literary hybridity in the colonial period is the so-called "barroco de Indias," and here one might consider the adaptation of "gongorismo" in the work of Hernando Domínguez Camargo in Colombian literature and that of two seventeenth-century Mexican savants, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, to name but a few.

A conquered and colonized people may of course "speak back to the empire" through revolution. Or, still in *nepantla* even after achieving independence, they may speak back through works of the imagination. From the many examples of post-colonial expression from within the condition of *nepantla*, of turning the colonizer's words back on the colonizer, of utilizing rhetoric different from that of the colonizer, or of creating characters who embody the new cultural values, let us choose just two brief examples from twentieth-century Latin American literature.

At the end of the first chapter of his novel, *El otoño del patriarca*, Gabriel García Márquez has his main character, the almost immortal dictator of an unnamed Caribbean island, wake up in his presidential palace one fine morning in the twentieth century and experience again "that historic October Friday" [of 1492]. What happened in the world while he has been asleep? he wonders. Everyone is wearing red caps and carrying jingle bells. Some strangers have arrived, he is told. They speak an odd language, for they make the word for "sea" feminine, when it is really masculine. They call canoes rafts and harpoons javelins. They exclaim over how beautiful our bodies are and how thick our hair is. Yet we are as normal as the day our mothers bore us. In order to please them we have traded what we have, receiving in return cheap glass beads that we have hung around our necks. The patriarch opens his bedroom window and looks out on the Caribbean. There he sees "the usual battleship that the [US] marines had left behind at the dock, and beyond the battleship, anchored in the shadowy sea ... the three caravels" (García Márquez, 1976: 40–42; in the Spanish, García Márquez, 1975: 44–46). The descriptive details and the terminology come

from Columbus's diary of the first voyage and are presented from the perspective of the native people. García Márquez utilizes this intertextuality in order to criticize not only the European discovery of the New World and its subsequent colonization, but also American interventionism in Latin America. From the in-between space of the initial encounter, he claims a new, hybrid Latin American identity. In Latin American historiography, this process is sometimes called *mestizaje*, a term that in Latin America has acquired meanings beyond the exclusively ethnic one of race mixture. *Nepantla* is sometimes the result of *mestizaje*, of physically belonging to neither ethnicity. What happens then is up to the individual writer or character. García Márquez chooses the rhetorical strategy of speaking from the site of *nepantla* and turning the colonizer's language back onto the colonizer.

Another strategy might be to create a liminal character with a troubled sense of identity. In Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *El hablador* (1987), the main character, Saúl Zuratas, a Jew marginalized in white Peruvian culture and shown to be "different" because of an enormous birthmark on his face, abandons civilization in order to become an *hablador*, or speaker of tales, for the benefit of the Machiguenga Indians of the Peruvian Amazon. Zuratas preserves not only their culture but their very existence, transforming himself into their living memory. As long as he remembers and speaks, the culture will survive. And yet, though critically important to Machiguenga culture, he lives at its margins, wandering like the Jew of old from tribe to tribe in a perpetual *nepantla* existence. Saúl Zuratas can never *be* a Machiguenga.

During the earliest years of conquest and colonization, physical *mestizaje* was actually a policy of the Spanish Crown, for it was felt that descendants of mixed marriages would owe primary allegiance to the colonizing power. Alexander the Great promulgated the same policy in his marches through central Asia in the fourth century BCE. But the Spanish Crown soon abandoned that policy, and the terms *mestizo* and *mestizaje* were transformed into negative categories both legally and socially. In the twentieth century, *mestizaje* was transformed yet again, now from a negative into a positive category of racial and cultural identity, especially in politically charged rhetoric. This usage gives the term a place in identity politics. What is and is not *nepantla* evolves, like so much else, in response to changes in historical and cultural circumstances.

## India

In the early-modern era, the Portuguese began the process of opening up India to the western world. Their motive at first was not conquest but trade and especially the establishment of trade monopolies, radiating out from Goa. The missionary efforts (Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits) came later and competed with Moslem initiatives. From 1498 to about the middle of the eighteenth century, various western powers – the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the English – wrestled for commercial and, occasionally, religious control over the Indian subcontinent. As England secured its power and influence, the East India Company championed English as the lingua franca of social control.

The East India Company may have ruled much of India, but the English colonizers in general remained rather ignorant about Indian culture and history for most of the 150 years after the Company received its charter from Queen Elizabeth on December 31, 1600. Only in the eighteenth century did Europeans – through the work of Sir William Jones and others – realize that India had a classical literature that could rival that of Greece and Rome. Once firmly and irrevocably in control, the English established Hindu College in 1817, in order to "educate" a class of Indians who could further English commercial interests and missionary activities. That intention was famously recast by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his 1835 "Minute on Indian Education": "we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we



govern – a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1888: 183).

In Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, the main character’s grandfather, named Aadam Asiz, while studying in Germany, learns to his surprise that “India – like radium – had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans” and that he was somehow their “invention” (Rushdie, 1980: 6). The shock of learning this “[knocks him] forever into that middle place” (1980: 6) occupied by colonized Indians. Their professional – though not necessarily their private – life was largely conducted, in Raja Rao’s phrase from his preface to *Kanthapura*, “in a language that is not one’s own” (Rao, 1963: vii). This was and is true of much Indian literary life as well. In the last two centuries, English has become the most common literary language in India, whether the writers are from Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, or Hyderabad, or whether their mother tongue is Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, or Kannada. There is no single tradition of Indian literature in English and its history cannot and should not be discussed as if it were just a branch of European literature, with literary movements succeeding each other in the manner of Neoclassicism yielding to Romanticism and so on. Through the prism of the English language, Indians share a common, if multi-faceted, sense of the colonized psyche. England, the English people, and the English language have become, in Ashis Nandy’s phrase, the country’s “intimate enemy” (Nandy, 1983). In the dedication to his own life story, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Nirad Chaudhuri (1968) writes that England “conferred subjecthood on us/ but withheld citizenship.” Politically as well as psychologically, then, England conferred *nepantla*.

The first work in Indian literature in English, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1793–94), reveals a desire to avoid *nepantla*. This autobiographical work recounts the adventures of a North Indian who becomes a sepoy in the military arm of the East India Company and eventually, with his Anglo-Irish wife, emigrates to Ireland and then to England. Using the epistolary form, Mahomet writes in the tone and from the perspective of an eighteenth-century Englishman. Once in England, however, he emphasizes his Indian origins in a series of business adventures. He presents himself as more English than Indian in India, and more Indian than English in England, assuming whatever persona seems the most advantageous. A shifting and variable sense of self is observable in many later Indian-English writers and their literary characters. That so variable a sense of self is central to so much Indian-English literature may be one of the unintended consequences of the programmatic imposition of English as an instrument of colonization and governance.

In another unintended consequence, the education advocated with such condescension in the “Minute” fashioned not only a class of bureaucratic middlemen but also of intellectuals, the writers and thinkers who in the twentieth century would turn the language of their masters back on them, achieve political independence, and create a new and modern literature equal to the literature of any other twentieth-century country. Most of the most recent critical attention has been given to writers of prose, especially fiction, but the earliest Indian writers of serious literature in English were poets like Henry Derozio (1809–1831) and Michael Madhusan Dutt (1824–1873), who first wrote in English and then turned exclusively to Bengali. The most famous of the poets is, of course, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), author of *Gitanjali* and other works in Bengali (which he often translated into English himself). His work is a hybrid of Western literature and Indian themes and texts, from Baul songs to the Upanishads. In awarding him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, the Nobel committee praised him as an “Anglo-Indian poet” whose work belongs to English literature, is not “exotic but truly universally human in character” and reconciles “two spheres of civilization widely separated.” Tagore is further praised for contributing to “the expansion of British civilization ever since the days of Queen Elizabeth” and for the “consummate skill [with which] he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West” (Hjärne, 1913). These remarks have a patronizing and skeptical tone, as if it beggars belief that an Indian could possess “his own English words.”

Salman Rushdie describes the first Indian novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), as a “dud” and a “poor melodramatic thing,” the first in a history that, for 70 undistinguished years, produced “no English-language fiction of any quality” (Rushdie, 1997: xvi–xvii). Indian Literature in English came into its own, Rushdie says, with the parents of independence, “midnight’s parents,” figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and G.V. Desani (1997: xvi–xvii). All of them registered the experience of *nepantla* in their work and, from that in-between space, they opposed their colonizers. Nehru tried to de-Europeanize world history. Gandhi used his own life and the language of law, in which he was trained, to turn the British legal system on its head as he worked toward independence. Anand’s novel *Untouchable* (1935), with an introduction by E. M. Forster, won him great acclaim and he spent much of his life between England and India, eventually working for the “International Progress Organization” in 1970s which stressed the importance of dialogue between and among civilizations. Some of Narayan’s works (*Swami and Friends*; *The Guide*) deal with figures marginalized within Indian society. Other works deal with “colonized Indians” (*The Bachelor of Arts*; *The English Teacher*). Almost all are set in the fictional and mythified town of Malgudi.

Fiction writers, more than the poets or dramatists, have garnered the most critical attention and produced the work most directly and complexly inspired by the spirit of *nepantla*. Almost obsessively, writers return over and over to the in-betweenness that characterizes both their lives and their work. For example, in *All about H. Hatterr*, a work strongly influenced by Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, G. V. Desani writes of his central character that he is “fifty-fifty of the species,” one of his parents being European and the other being Oriental (Desani, 1951: 3–4). More recently, Anita Desai, born of a German mother and a Bengali father, considers herself “totally Indian” but admits that while she feels about India as an Indian, she thinks about it as an outsider (Bliss, 1988: 527). This may be why she has chosen in some of her most memorable fiction (“Scholar and Gypsy”; *Baumgartner’s Bombay*; *Journey to Ithaca*) to portray foreigners in India as they try to find a place for themselves in an unfamiliar land and culture. A similar sense of displacement, of a double identity, or of a shifting sense of self, marks many other Indian-English writers. Many of Bharati Mukherjee’s characters occupy the in-between spaces of the foreigner, either the foreigner in America (the Punjabi woman who Americanizes herself in *Jasmine*) or the repatriated Indian who, after marrying a Westerner, returns to India (*The Tiger’s Daughter*). Though born in India and acknowledging that her roots are there, Mukherjee also insists that her roots are now in North America and that she considers herself a fully American writer (Meer, 1989).

In today’s globalized world, special mention should be made concerning those who, deracinated, represent the “Indian diaspora.” The first significant Indian diaspora occurred in the nineteenth century through the migration of indentured peasants to agricultural areas in places like Trinidad, South Africa, Malaysia, and Surinam. Literature began to be produced in subsequent generations. The most famous writers descended from this initial diasporic generation are V. S. Naipaul and his brother Shiva Naipaul of Trinidad. Both have written extensively of their feeling of not belonging anywhere, of finding themselves always in-between various cultures (Trinidad, India, England), of constantly trying to “find the center” (the subject of one of V. S. Naipaul’s books), and of longing for home within a homeless and peripatetic existence. Even the attempt to return to India, as V. S. Naipaul has somewhat bitterly documented in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), results in his failing to find “home,” a failure that pushes him into *nepantla* in his own culture of (distant) origin. In an essay on the Indian Diaspora, Sudesh Mishra (2003: 279) has labelled this condition one of nomadic terror, existential panic, homesickness, and the nausea of namelessness. Mishra contrasts this kind of diasporic writer, the product of colonialism and its later consequences, with another kind who has consciously sought out and occupied “border zones, exemplified by the uneasy interaction between gender, class, ethnicity and nation states” (Mishra,



2003: 285). Salman Rushdie comes to mind. So, too, does Ved Mehta, who grew up marginalized by the sighted world because of his blindness, and who emigrated from India in search of a better education for the blind, eventually becoming a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Consider Pico Iyer who, born in England in 1957, has made his homelessness and restlessness a central motivation for a career of travel writing (Mishra, 2003: 293).

Because of its impact on subsequent Indian-English writers, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is generally given pride of place in the history of recent Indian Literature in English. It has been said that, influenced by Rushdie as well as by the "magical realism" of Latin American literature, Indian English literature took a quantum leap in terms of quality and quality. That so many of its writers live and work outside of India is testament to the reality and spirit of *nepantla*. In an essay whose title I no longer recall, the Senegalese poet (and president of his country) Léopold Senghor wrote: "Toute vraie culture est un métissage." Mixture, hybridity, mestizaje, *nepantla* – all seem central to much of the best writing in the modern world, whether it comes from Latin America, India, or Japan.

## Japan

Having lived through what he called the "discouraging condition of things in the Portuguese Indies," Francis Xavier was eager to go to Japan (Murdoch, 1964: 40). About 10 weeks after landing, he wrote an optimistic letter (5 November 1549) to his fellow Jesuits in Goa: "The people whom we have met so far," he stated, "are the best who have as yet been discovered; and it seems to me that we shall never find among heathens another race to equal the Japanese" (Boxer, 1951: 37–38). The people were "white," that is, whiter than the people of Goa; they were literate; they had good manners and were not malicious; they esteemed honor "above all else in the world"; they abhorred theft; they had a highly ritualized and well-regulated society; and they were hospitable.

At the beginning, misunderstandings furthered the Jesuits' cause, somewhat like those misunderstandings that facilitated Cortés's triumphs in Mexico. The Japanese first thought that Christian missionaries were Buddhists, and in the middle of that first decade a local daimyo, Ouchi Yoshinaga, gave them permission to stay in a Buddhist monastery in order "to develop the law of Buddhism" (Murdoch, 1964: 67). The missionaries were even called *Tenjikujin* or people from the land of the Buddha. Naturally, the Buddhist monks who first received the missionaries were soon bewildered by the visitors and their teachings, reacting initially like that Aztec in Mexico criticized by Diego Durán. For example, some Buddhist monks agreed on one occasion (in December 1591) to be baptized, expecting that they could continue being monks and officiate at Buddhist rites. They were very much surprised when the "padres" told them that this was forbidden by Christian doctrine and impossible (Murdoch, 1964: 68). The missionaries' exclusionist, intolerant, and increasingly strident evangelism became divisive and disruptive.

In this fluid and volatile context, a most unusual "diplomatic" mission took place. In the fall of 1613, a group of Japanese under the leadership of a samurai named Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga (d. 1622) and at the behest of their daimyo, embarked on a voyage that would take them to Mexico (known then as "Nueva España"), Spain, and Italy and to audiences with those countries' highest secular and religious authorities. It was Japan's first "embassy" to the western world, and it would be the last until the nineteenth century. The ostensible goal of the mission was to secure favorable trading conditions with Spain. They were accompanied by Father Luis Sotelo (1574–1624). Three or four months after the Japanese left the country, Tokugawa Ieyasu promulgated his famous Christian expulsion edict.<sup>6</sup> In 1620, they returned to a xenophobic country dedicated to the persecution of Christian converts, their own lives in danger. What actually happened to Hasekura after

his return is unclear, but this fascinating episode of Japanese history became the subject of speculative fiction in a novel by Shūsaku Endō in the twentieth century.

In the seventeenth century, most Japanese – whether lay people, Buddhist monks, or daimyos – did not remain in *nepantla* long. By 1640, with the country officially in seclusion (in Japanese, *sakoku*), the Tokugawa or Edo period championed identity consciousness, emphasized alterity and the we–they binary, refused western influences, and developed an inward-looking, well-regulated, cohesive, and homogeneous culture. The only exception to the self-imposed separation from the West was the establishment of a minuscule and strictly controlled Dutch trading outpost on a slip of land called Deshima (or Dejima) in the Nagasaki harbor.

As was the case in Tenochtitlan, there were “religious” debates in Japan. When the Japanese fully understood the Catholic position (its main spokesmen were Francis Xavier, Luis de Almeida, and Cosme de Torres),<sup>7</sup> they stubbornly opposed it. The most consistent and damning opposition came from Japanese who had converted to Christianity (they were known as brothers or irmãos, ‘iruma’ in Japanese romaji) and then “de-converted.” In effect, the criticisms of the former irmãos came from “inside” knowledge and experience.<sup>8</sup> They questioned virtually everything: from the creation of the world (they considered the Christian version bogus because the Chinese, who knew everything, had never mentioned it) to the notion of there being only one God and that God omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good. Where, then, did the evil in the world come from, if not from this all-encompassing God? Moreover, how could this supremely good God condemn so much of humanity to hell, especially all of the ancestors of the Japanese? They called Christianity a “cult” of “little truth” as well as “a perverse and cursed faith” (Elison, 1988: 259). They accused Christians of devilish arrogance, outright deceit, hypocrisy, and insincerity. Westerners, in particular the Jesuits, were called “creatures,” “long-nosed goblins,” “demons,” and “tricksters” who disguised themselves as Buddhist priests in order to gain the confidence of the Japanese (Toby, 1994: 323–351). The Christians struck back, accusing the Japanese of insincerity, inscrutability, and pride. In this atmosphere, no mediation was possible.

Comodore Matthew Perry and his “black ships” arrived in Japan in the 1850s, forcibly opening the country to western commerce and influence. The Meiji Restoration began in 1868. These two events initiated long decades of *nepantla* rather different from that experienced during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Thrust into a liminal space, many Japanese felt trapped – none felt completely at ease – between traditional Asian values and a relentless pressure to modernize, with the West as a model. Literature written in and about the Meiji period reflects a particularly psychological dislocation different from that experienced in either Latin America or India.

*Nepantla* was evident in cultural thought as well. The work of a leading intellectual of the Meiji period, Yukichi Fukuzawa (1834–1901), analyzes the challenge facing many Japanese at that time. His most sustained work is *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (1875). Meiji Japan must decide, Fukuzawa maintains, between returning to the past (and to “barbarism”) and embracing the future (that is, “civilization”). Since it is the West that has understood what “civilization” is, Japan must learn from the Western conception if it, too, is to become civilized. Japan may feel inferior in comparison with the West, and indeed may be paralyzed by that sense of inferiority, but it can learn from the West and progress toward higher states of civilization, especially because it has the potential to harmonize East and West, utilizing its in-betweenness in service of a better future.

A great deal of Japanese literature from the Meiji to the present day is informed by the tension between East and West, or between Japaneseness and occidentalism. Sometimes authors work creatively in the middle, using the tension as a motivating factor for their characters and motifs. Sometimes authors reject occidentalism and emphasize traditional values and forms such as haiku, waka, noh, the diary form, and historical writing. For them, the preservation of Japaneseness and the insistence on alterity consciousness in the face of pressure from the West are more

important than creative mediation. Other authors apparently try to reject their Japanese origins and culture. Whatever the case, many important early-modern Japanese authors lived and wrote “in *nepantla*”: Kafū Nagai, Mori Ōgai, Sōseki Natsume, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, and Jun’ichirō Tanizaki. *Nepantla* is also later taken up and re-articulated by writers like Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima, Shūsaku Endō, Osamu Dazai, and Kenzaburō Ōe, to name a few.

An analysis of *nepantla* in these authors would require many pages. Therefore, I restrict my comments to just a few representative examples: two works by Sōseki Natsume (1867–1916) as portraying the “in-betweenness” experienced during Japan’s transition from traditionalism to modernity, the trajectory of the career of Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965) as he negotiated his country’s complicated relationship to the United States, the recreation by Shūsaku Endō (1923–1996) of the seventeenth-century Samurai mission to the West in his 1980 novel *The Samurai*, and the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Yasunari Kawabata in 1968 and to Kenzaburō Ōe in 1994.

Sōseki (who is commonly known by his first name rather than by his family name) is considered by many Japanese scholars, along with Ōgai, as the most important modern and modernizing writer of the Meiji and Taishō periods. In 1911, Sōseki delivered a lecture entitled “The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan” in which he revisits issues discussed by Fukuzawa in his *Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Sōseki states that Western civilization “is internally motivated” and has developed “naturally from within, as a flower.” However, Japanese “civilization is externally motivated” (Sōseki, 1992: 272). Therefore, it is “forced to assume a certain form as the result of pressure applied from the outside” (1992: 272). Having lost the ability to be “self-centered,” Japan survived only by “taking orders from the external force that was pushing [it] around at will” (1992: 272). The psychological impact of this state of affairs is an unsteady and even frightened consciousness: “The country is like a man who has been snatched up by a flying monster [and is] afraid of being dropped, hardly aware of the course he is following” (1992: 278). It is not surprising that Sōseki can “only view Japan’s future with pessimism” (1992: 282).

A frightened consciousness, ambivalence, and pessimism – the result of, in a word, *nepantla* – are at the heart of Sōseki’s novel *Sorekara* (それから, *And Then*) and of the life and personality of its central character, Daisuke. The novel takes place in late Meiji, with the country still euphoric after its defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–05). The main character, Daisuke, is a young man of thirty, born to privilege and wealth, and considered “a dandy” (Sōseki, 2011: 2); he has neither a job nor a career, is bored by life (the word used in the English translation is *ennui*), and alternates a western intellectualism with a very Japanese attention to flowers and the weather. Once his fragile equilibrium is disturbed by the appearance of Michiyo, with whom he had been secretly in love, he experiences the “kind of anxiety peculiar to modern Japan” (Sōseki, 2011: 102). The novel ends with Daisuke riding aimlessly around the city in a street car, his head “burning.” This aimless and pained circling about, Sōseki is suggesting, is happening in Meiji Japan.

The complexities of cultural and personal ambivalence can be seen in several writers of late Meiji and Taishō. Tanizaki, for example, was fascinated by the West early in his career in his 1924 novel *Naomi*, in which he modeled his heroine after Mary Pickford. As he matured, however, he devoted himself to Japanese subjects and characters increasingly. He waxed nostalgic in his 1933 essay “In Praise of Shadows,” which evoked the Japanese love for old things and the shadowed texture of life that was being lost by modern lighting and technology (Tanizaki, 1977). Yet his turn toward traditionalism was not without its own difficulties. As *The Makioka Sisters*, a novel about traditional Osaka culture and its decline during the 1930s and the early years of World War II, was being serialized during the war, Tanizaki was criticized for not contributing to the war effort and the *yamato* spirit; publication was halted and the completed novel was not published until 1949.

Finally, his translation into modern Japanese of *The Tale of Genji* occupied him for many of the postwar years.

Shūsako Endō's novel *The Samurai* (1980) movingly recreates the *nepantla* world into which Hasekura and his party of 20 Japanese were thrust during their embassy to the West in 1613. Throughout the novel, Endō pays the most attention to the psychological condition of Hasekura and his servant Nishi. Both are conflicted because of having converted to Christianity. In Endō's words, Hasekura feels his heart crumbling inside him (1997: 166). It is in this crumbling of the heart, this battle within the souls of the two main characters, that the dynamic tension of the novel may be found. Endō thus makes into literature, in the Japanese context, an experience of *nepantla* not unlike that experienced by the Indian in Durán's anecdote. The novel is somewhat autobiographical: Endō was baptized into the Catholic faith at the age of 11, studied in Europe after the Second World War, and admitted to having had many of the same experiences that he portrayed in his characters.

The catastrophe of the Second World War has marked Japan as no other cross-cultural experience has. In *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, John Dower (1999) has brilliantly and exhaustively discussed the effects of defeat and occupation on all aspects of Japanese culture. Those effects surface in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, in an early work, *A Personal Matter* (1964), Kenzaburō Ōe has written eloquently about trying to come to terms at the same time with the reality of having a brain-damaged son and with the horror and burden of "Hiroshima." In several subsequent fictional works, interviews, and essays, Ōe maps his experience as the father of a handicapped child onto his own family's resulting sense of isolation and in-betweenness in Japanese society, as well as onto his trajectory as a *nepantla* writer during and after the American occupation. Among the many works that deal with that mode of *nepantla* peculiar to the Japanese because of the Pacific War and the atomic bomb are *The Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948), both by Osamu Dazai, and *Black Rain* (1966) by Masuji Ibuse.

In 1968, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese writer to receive the prize. Anders Österling, speaking for the Nobel Committee, wrote: "[Kawabata] has admittedly been influenced by modern western realism, but, at the same time, he has retained his footing in Japan's classical literature . . . [He has contributed] in his way to the spiritual bridge-building between East and West" (Österling, 1968).

Though its characterization of Kawabata is not as condescending as that of Tagore, the Nobel Committee finds value in Yasunari's work, as it did in the case of Tagore, in its relationship to western literature, in "spiritual bridge-building." In his Nobel Prize lecture, entitled "Japan, The Beautiful and Myself," Kawabata refers to "the West" only twice. The first is to mention a Japanese scholar of the work of Botticelli in order to remark on the seasonal characteristics of Japanese art. The second is to state that "the emptiness, the nothingness of the Orient [and Zen]" cannot be confused with "the nihilism of the West." Every other sentence, every detail, is devoted to Japanese writers and culture. Implicitly, Kawabata rejects western values and literary culture. "Do not," Kawabata appears to be saying, "place me in *nepantla* between East and West."

Twenty-six years later, in 1994, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Kenzaburō Ōe. Clearly echoing Kawabata, he entitles his own Nobel Lecture, "Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself." But Ōe's attitude differs from Kawabata's. Ōe begins by praising two western books that had fascinated him in childhood: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. Commenting at length on Kawabata's Nobel lecture, Ōe (1994) finds it at once beautiful and "vague." By vague (he cites the Japanese word *aimaina*) Ōe means to draw attention to the vagueness, ambivalence, and ambiguity that is part of Japanese culture itself and its language. Then Ōe comes to the heart of his lecture, which is contained in the word

“ambiguous.” “My observation is that after one hundred and twenty years of modernisation since the opening of the country, present-day Japan is split between two opposite poles of ambiguity. I too am living as a writer with this polarisation imprinted on me like a deep scar” (Ōe, 1994). This “powerful and penetrating” ambiguity has split both the state and its people. Japan’s experience, as it has tried to model itself on the West, has been “cataclysmic,” as proven by the Pacific War, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Ōe himself, “split between the opposite poles of ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese,” hopes to “be of some use in a cure and reconciliation of mankind” through “the exquisite healing power of art” (Ōe, 1994). He speaks throughout from his profound and sometimes painful awareness of his in-betweenness and sense of dislocation, an awareness that is central to his work.

## Conclusion

Despite a common origin of contact with the West, Latin America, India, and Japan experienced *nepantla* differently. Who went to the Latin American New World, India, or Japan, on whose authority, with what intentions, and on the basis of what expectations and knowledge? Were the encounters of short or long duration? Were they transformative; if so, to what extent? When Latin America was “discovered,” it became the new fourth part of the world, the *quarta orbis pars*, expanding and revising a tripartite western conception of the world which had been in effect since the Greeks. India, in contrast, had long been known to the West. Herodotus, in the fifth century BCE, had described it in the third book of his *History*. Alexander the Great had invaded it a century later. Megasthenes (d. 290 BCE) had written *Indika*, of which only fragments remain, cited by Arrian, Pliny, and other historians. Japan had been known – though inexactly – to Western travelers since the Middle Ages. Spain and Portugal imposed a linguistic, cultural, and political hegemony on Latin America that effectively muzzled most indigenous voices. India kept its languages and regional literatures, even as English, in time, became the dominant language. Japan never lost the primacy of its language as a consequence of western incursions, but its values – literary and otherwise – were challenged and sometimes transformed. In the Latin American New World there was largely one encounter by the Spanish and Portuguese – with some colonizing initiatives from the English, French, and Dutch in and around the Caribbean – that continued without a radical break, though through many phases, from 1492 to the present. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danish, and the French all had colonial interests in India, but it was England, through the East India Company primarily, that by 1800 was able to establish hegemonic control. Japan experienced three major incursions from the West, the first in the sixteenth century, the second in the nineteenth, and the third after the Second World War. Each encounter with Japan had a different dynamic. Latin America, India, and Japan, so widely separated geographically, expressed their in-betweenness differently, due to differences in their historical circumstances, in ethnicities and languages, as well as in religious and cultural traditions.

Initial encounters and their consequences may be re-articulated at a later date. Critics have generally described these re-articulations as writing back to the empire, as the periphery answering the core, as the subaltern speaking to the master, as post-colonial resistance, or as the decolonization of the mind. Terms commonly used to describe cross-cultural encounters include the older ones of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the newer ones of contact zones, hybridity or *métissage*, liminality, and post-coloniality. *Nepantla*, in my view, is a suggestive and flexible concept aptly suited for analyzing the literature and rhetoric responding to, and shaped by, cross-cultural encounters. Why? First, *nepantla* identifies an ethical situation that can best be resolved through true mediation. Second, the *nepantla* condition reflects and contains ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty; it is polyvalent and polysemic. It is, in sum, like literature itself.



## Notes

1. The case of Japan in Taiwan is particularly interesting because it is an intra-Asian encounter. See, for example, the *nepantla* experienced by the main character, Hu Taiming, in a novel concerning Japanese occupation (1895–1945) entitled *Orphan of Asia*. This novel by Zhuoliu Wu (1900–1976) was written in 1945 but not translated into English until 2006.
2. “En estas islas fasta aquí no he hallado ombres mostrudos, como muchos pensavan” (Colón, 1982b: 144).
3. “Venid a ver los hombres que vinieron del çielo, traedles de comer y de beber” (Colón, 1982a: 33).
4. In 1555, Fray Toribio de Benavente o Motolinía, who was one of original Franciscans taking part in the 1524 debate, wrote that if the Indians refused to willingly listen to the gospel they should be compelled to do so “by force” (Motolinía, 1971: 411).
5. See Yves d’Evreux, *Viagem ao norte do Brasil*, cited by León-Portilla in Sahagún (1986: 17).
6. The Christian Expulsion Edict of 1614, which banned Christianity and expelled Christians and foreigners, led many Japanese Christians to flee either to Macao or the Philippines. Ieyasu’s edict followed previous edicts, especially those of 1587 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi limiting the propagation of Christianity and expelling missionaries.
7. See especially Schurhammer (1929), cited by Klor de Alva (1983).
8. Four seminal and extensive criticisms of Christianity, written by Japanese, are published in translation in Elison (1988: 257–389). They are “*Ha Daisus*” by Fabian Fucan (259–291), “*Kengiroku*” by Christovão Ferreira sive Sawano Chūan (293–318), “*Kirishitan Monogatari*” by Anonymous (319–374), and “*Ha Kirishitan*” by Suzuki Shōsan (375–389).

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