

Teacher's Guide for *Nepantla Familias: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature on Families in between Worlds*, edited by Sergio Troncoso

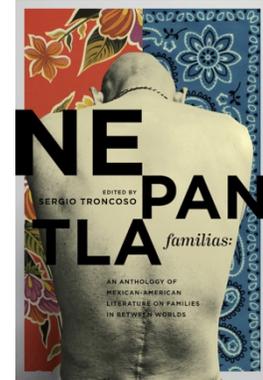
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Summary

The anthology is composed of Essays, Poetry, and Short Stories.

Thirty works by 26 writers; 25 of the 30 works are published in the anthology for the first time.

David Romo, Sergio Troncoso, Reyna Grande, Stephanie Elizondo Griest, Francisco Cantú, Rigoberto González, Alex Espinoza, Domingo Martinez, Oscar Cásares, Lorraine M. López, David Dominguez, Stephanie Li, Sheryl Luna, José Antonio Rodríguez, Deborah Paredez, Octavio Quintanilla, Sandra Cisneros, Diana Marie Delgado, Diana López, Severo Perez, Octavio Solis, ire'ne lara silva, Rubén Degollado, Helena María Viramontes, Daniel Chacón, Matt Mendez.

What is Nepantla?

It is a **Nahuatl word** from the Aztecs that means 'the middle ground' or 'the middle space.'

An important philosophical influence for editor Sergio Troncoso was Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The Mestiza Experience*. She wrote about Nepantla: "Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent.... From the in-between place of Nepantla, you see through the fiction of the monoculture."

The **Mexican American experience embodies Nepantla**: living in between the U.S. and Mexico, between English and Spanish, between different cultures and psychologies, and between new values and traditional ones.

Nepantla is also about **the hybridity and combinations of the self**, as well as the complexities of identity versus a notion of identity as a monoculture or a static entity.

Empathy is at the root of Nepantla: to understand the Mexican American experience and to appreciate a life as crossing borders and living in a middle ground also help you to understand others *inside* as well as *outside* of your community.

Nepantla is also a **universal experience** that applies even to those who aren't Mexican American: if you've ever loved someone from a different culture, race, or religion; or if you've ever tried to make a home in a strange place at once hostile and welcoming; or if you've ever felt

stymied by ancestors and their demands, yet also emboldened by their sacrifices and forgotten values, you will find yourself in these pages of *Nepantla Familias*.

Nepantla is also **the quintessential American experience** and revives important foundational values of the U.S. through immigrants and the children of immigrants. The Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony and those that followed them were also crossing borders.

Nepantla attempts to solve the biggest problem we have in this country: We are not a ‘We’ anymore, or we are struggling to see ourselves in others. Not enough of us are crossing borders and living in this middle ground. So, focusing on Nepantla, and empathy is **a call to action**.

Discussion Questions

(An asterisk * signifies a potential long or short essay question.)

- *1. According to Sergio Troncoso in his introduction, what are **the three reasons that the Mexican American experience of Nepantla will forever be essential and important** to the United States? Why does this matter, in your opinion?
- *2. Compare and contrast how **El Paso and Jerusalem embody Nepantla** in David Romo’s essay. How is Nepantla an international/universal experience?
- *3. What are the ways in which Sergio Troncoso **translated the Mexican immigrant values** he learned on the border to succeed in places far away from the border? How is this translation an example of the hybrid identity of the Nepantla experience?
- *4. According to Troncoso, **why do you cross a border** (i.e. a geographic, linguistic, or cultural border)? How do you make a ‘home’ in a place that is both welcoming and hostile? How is this ‘home’ a new place that includes both where you are from as well as where you are going? What are the difficulties in making a ‘new self’ in this new place?
- *5. What is **subtractive bilingualism** and how did Reyna Grande work to overcome it? Did she succeed? What are the main reasons additive bilingualism is difficult to achieve in the United States?
- *6. Why is Stephanie Elizondo Griest finally able to release her grief about her father’s death in the Panteon San Miguel in Mexico? How is this release tied to **claiming a part of her heritage**, and why was this important for her? Is finding out who you are a static affirmation or a dynamic experience?
- *7. When a family member does *not* share stories about who they were and how they got to be where they are, why does this create such **an important and unresolved need for these stories for subsequent generations**? Why do these stories matter? Use Francisco Cantú’s essay as a starting point to explore this question.

- *8. How did Rigoberto González cross the border **from being “invisible” because of homophobia at home and in school to becoming visible**? Who helped him along the way and how did he help himself?
- *9. Describe the social pressures Alex Espinoza endured to adopt **‘toxic masculinity’ and the obstacles he had to overcome to achieve a nontoxic sense of self-confidence**? Do you see any of these social pressures in your family? How do you resist them or change them?
- *10. Why do you think the young Domingo Martinez (“Yunior”) accepts riding with three white guys who are often making fun of him? How can his father’s admonition, “No te déjes,” be adopted/translated so that **you gain self-respect with friends, rather than lose it**? What kind of friends help you to achieve a healthy sense of self-respect? Describe them.
- *11. What are **the expectations of Oscar Cásares’s father on his young son (Oscar)** and how do they shape the boy’s actions and responses to his work and to the mishap in the parade? How would you describe the father’s values? What do you think of them?
- *12. Were you a **‘middle child’ or a ‘second child’** like Lorraine López was in her essay? What kind of special pressures do you face in this in-between land of Nepantla? What special abilities are you able to master if you are in such a position with your siblings and in your family? Why do you think López can describe this situation with humor?
- *13. Why do you think David Dominguez wanted to emulate his father and his work ethic? Describe the positive values he sees when remembering his father. How will Dominguez be different from his father, even if he admires him? Do you think it’s difficult **to honor your ancestors at the same time that you go beyond them**?
- *14. How is Stephanie Li’s essay an example of the loneliness of crossing a border (i.e. cultural, racial, or linguistic) for the person who originally crossed it but also for her family? **What do you leave behind when you cross a border** and try to create a new self in Nepantla? What are the limits of knowing the world of your parents if they crossed a border a long time ago? How can you make an effort to overcome those limits?
- *15. In her essay, how does Sheryl Luna **rise above the self-hate and the abuse she faced at home**? How did learning about her heritage and educating herself give her a new perspective to see herself and also her mother? Have you faced similar struggles? Were you able to overcome them, and if so, how?
- *16. Describe the ways in which José Antonio Rodríguez feels “alien” to himself and to others. How did **writing poetry help him to find a place where he belongs**? How does writing about your life help you to think about, evaluate, and take action on your life? Why do you think writing can sometimes have this effect?
- *17. Discuss the **images of separation and touch** in José Antonio Rodríguez’s poem, “The Last Time I Went to Church.” Why are these images important?

*18. Discuss the **generational comparison and guilt** in Sheryl Luna's poem, "Duty." Why do you think she feels a sense of guilt over becoming "Americanized"? What do you lose and what do you gain when you cross a border?

*19. Why does Deborah Paredez describe herself as "my mother's spangled handiwork"? **To what extent are you shaped by your parents' values** and how can you break free from them, if you so choose?

*20. How is the past never only in the past in Octavio Quintanilla's poem, "You're tired of your life," in which he writes, "You're still trying to convince yourself to leave your parents' small town. What if you leave and there's no way back? No one to give you directions?" Describe a Nepantla experience in which you are **living in the past, living in the present, all in one day and within one family**.

*21. Describe how objects in Mexico have different meanings for Sandra Cisneros from the meanings they had for her ancestors. Why does this matter? Is there **a sense of accomplishment as well as a sense of guilt** when you return to the land of your ancestors after having crossed many borders in your life? How do you create a sense of self that affirms your present choices but also honors the past that led up to you?

*22. In Diana Marie Delgado's poem, she writes, "Can you forgive that?" on the last line. Describe what it is that the author is struggling to forgive. What are **inheritances from your parents that you can never forgive**?

*23. Describe who the "lotus eaters" are in Diana López's story, "Dutiful Daughter." **Can your own family hold you back** when you (like the protagonist Juanita) are doing something they don't understand, or crossing a border they haven't crossed? How must someone living this Nepantla experience form a new community, beyond your family, to give you support and encouragement?

*24. Describe how Severo Perez's "Melancholy Baby" is an example of the **Nepantla experience as it relates to religion**. How difficult is it for the next generation to ask hard questions about the religion of their parents, or even to reject their religion? Give us some examples of this type of experience within your family. How were the problems resolved, or not?

*25. In Octavio Solis's "Mundo Means World," describe the **'toxic masculinity' that the gun promotes in Mundo** while he has it in his possession. Why do you think he needs this type of self-confidence? Why do you think he eventually realizes that this type of self-confidence is not for him?

*26. Describe **the ways the dead are as present as the living** in Irene Lara Silva's "Border as Womb Emptied of Night and Swallows." How does this liminal existence, between the living and the dead, exemplify Nepantla? In what ways are your family members always with you, long after they have died?

*27. In Rubén Degollado’s “Family Unit,” what are the ways in which **the death of a child as well as the death of the possibility of having children** have thrown Seferino into a liminal zone where he doesn’t know where he belongs, who he is, and what his relationship with Evelyn will be.

*28. Why do you think V. Rocha dresses in a zoot suit, with a pompadour, and all the stylish accoutrements in Helena María Viramontes’s “The Surprise Trancazo”? Is it a matter of pride or rebellion? Is it a matter of belonging somewhere he doesn’t quite belong? Is it a matter of asserting a sense of self that’s different from his surroundings? How can **music and style be ways to create a liminal space in Nepantla** that is unique to you as an immigrant or as the progeny of immigrants?

*29. Why do you think the first-person protagonist in Daniel Chacón’s “Mujeres Matadas” loves Black Metal music? When Mari(a), the guitarist, invites him to Juárez for a concert how does **traveling across the border prompt the protagonist to question himself**? What aspects of himself does he question?

*30. Carlos is searching for his dead twin (Hector) with a sonogram in his hand in Matt Mendez’s “The Astronaut.” Describe this **‘metaphysical Nepantla’** and its reality for Carlos and why it might prompt him to action. Have you ever experienced something that was not rational or real in the conventional sense, but that had such a call to your soul? Why do you think this happened to you? Why did it matter to you?

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