

## Article

# Nakagami Kenji and Latin American Literature: Charting an Imagined Frontier

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### Abstract

Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) is one of the most famous writers of contemporary Japan, though his works have been scarcely translated into other languages. Of the many topics in his literature, the current paper will focus on his relationship with Latin America, a region he was never able to visit, yet one that strongly convoked him. In order to explain such a relationship, we will coin the term 'imagined frontier', understanding through it the global connections of regions despite their actual geography and thanks to the imaginative and literary activity of their local writers. In the first section, the paper will summarize and comment on Nakagami's critique of the concept *monogatari* (tale, narrative), one of his most important contributions to Japanese literature which simultaneously made him turn his attention to regions in the world outside of Japan. In the second section, the paper will delve deeper into the author's biography during the beginnings of the 1980s and will bring together Nakagami's allusions and references to Latin America, as well as the applications that he made of such connection in a quest to develop and define his image and profile as a writer in an international level. In the third section, the paper will analyze Nakagami's 1982 novel *Sennen no yuraku* (Pleasures of a Thousand Years), in which he used literary techniques associated with Latin American writers and explicitly utilized Latin America as setting for two of the novel's chapters. In general terms, the paper show Nakagami's complex interpretations of Latin America and the way in which his understanding of the region was translated into his 1982 novel.

### Questioning Narratives, New Frontiers

The 1950s was a period of intense political turmoil in Japan, starting with the American-driven, anti-Communist purges, and the *shuntō* (literally, 'spring offensive') mobilizations of worker unions that demanded better wages and work conditions. The 1960s saw

only escalation in the protests. Japan was shaken by mass demonstrations against the revision of the 1951 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan (ANPO), students' movements and uprisings which extended throughout the decade until the infamous events of 1968, and peace marches following groups such as the Beheiren (Peace in Vietnam Citizens' Committee), which protested the Vietnam War from 1964 until the armed conflict ended. During the 1970s, on the other hand, as Oguma Eiji explains, the demands shifted gradually to issues concerning women rights and the recognition of minorities such as Ainu, Okinawans, Korean residents and descendants of Japanese expatriates who had returned to the country after the War (Oguma, 2).

Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) stands at the very crux of this 1970s shift. Born in Shingu City in Wakayama Prefecture, he was a member of the outcast group known as *burakumin* (literally, 'people from the villages'), a group discriminated against both for their economic status and for their ethnic origins.<sup>1</sup> Nakagami did not exactly suffer the fate of extreme poverty, hard labor and discrimination typical of his fellow *burakumin*. In 1965 he was able to move to Tokyo with the intention of studying at university, where he got a job that allowed him to support his family back in Shingu. In the capital he started writing poetry and short-stories for several journals. In 1976 he published the nouvelle *Misaki* (The Cape), that won him the 74<sup>th</sup> Akutagawa Prize and put his literary career into motion. Despite his success as a writer, however, Nakagami never forgot to vindicate his *burakumin* origins in the context of the Japanese cultural center that was Tokyo. In the following decade, he published several works in which he portrayed the oppressive situation of his native outcast community: *Karekinada* (1977, Sea of Dead Trees), *Kishū: ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari* (1988, Kishū: Story of a Land of Roots, Land of Trees), *Hōsenka* (1980, Garden Balsam), *Sennen no yuraku* (1982, Pleasures of A Thousand Years), *Chi no hate, shijō no toki* (1983, At the End of the Earth, a Time of Ecstasy), and *Nichirin no tsubasa* (1984, Wings of the Sun).

Even more, Nakagami developed a theoretical framework which questioned the established narratives about the *burakumin* in Japanese historiography. In his essay collection "Monogatari no keifu" (A Genealogy of Narratives, serialized between 1979 and 1983), he contended canonical literary traditions and questioned the notion of *monogatari* (tale, narrative) itself.<sup>2</sup> According to Nakagami, *monogatari* are formulaic discursive structures that underlie texts of different times and spaces, and that channel our way of thinking into a single and monologic voice that oppresses difference. One such narrative is the legend of Emperor Jimmu as narrated by the ancient chronicles of Japan, which sustained the century-long-idea of the Japanese being a family devout to the *tennō* (Emperor). Nakagami explains that *monogatari* are better understood as a *hō / seido* (law / system) structures which permeate all aspects of human life, coercing people to act according a

comprehensive teleology. “Such laws / systems are far more oppressive than the laws / systems under the fearful rule of autocracy” (Nakagami, 1996: 121), said Nakagami. His literary pursuit was, therefore, to deconstruct such established *monogatari* and to put in the spotlight the narratives left in the shadow throughout Japan’s history.

Indeed, several literary critics consider Nakagami’s questioning of *monogatari* a central axis of his literature. Yomota Inuhiko, for instance, claimed that Akiyuki, the protagonist of several stories and alter-ego of the author, progresses from an unconscious follower to a self-conscious transgressor of his family *monogatari* (181).<sup>3</sup> Alan Tansman also focused on Akiyuki (specifically on his inability to sever paternal ties) to explain that Nakagami’s understanding of *monogatari* as an ongoing, ever-changing problematization of the past, sometimes with positive outcomes. Anne McKnight analyzed Nakagami’s applications of the category of ‘imperial syntax’, which presupposes that imperial centers are in need of margins and peripheries (e.g. *burakumin*) to grow stronger (159). Tomotsune Tsutomu, from a more critical stance, argued that, “Nakagami’s project of de-narrativization and reestablishing narrative did not aim to eliminate the emperor but instead to rearticulate the imperial system” (221). Meanwhile, Machiko Ishikawa gave a post-colonial reading of Nakagami’s literature, considering the *burakumin* as subaltern to mainstream Japanese society, and the writer’s critique of the latter as an attempt to ‘write back’ into a hegemonic center from which the subalterns had been excluded (3).

Indeed, Nakagami’s concept of contesting established narratives sparked into life when he moved from peripheral Shingu to central Tokyo, though it turned into a fully-fledged project after his travels outside of Japan. Interested in Korean theatre Pansori and in mask theatre, in 1978 Nakagami traveled to Seoul, where he befriended literary figures like Kim Chi-ha and Yun Heunggil, while planning an anthology of Korean literature that he would later publish as *Kankoku gendai tanpen shōsetsu* (Contemporary Korean Short-Stories, 1985). In 1979 Nakagami traveled with his family to Los Angeles and got his story “Jūkyūsai no chizu” (Map of a 19-year-old) adapted into a movie that was presented at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1982, Nakagami traveled to India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, before traveling to United States again to take part in Iowa University’s Writers Program. In 1984 he made a lengthy journey encompassing Seoul, Taiwan, Manila, Peshawar, Yakarta, and Bali, among other destinations. In 1985 he took part in several conferences in Europe and worked in New York as researcher at Columbia University, as a result publishing the book of interviews *Amerika, amerika* (1985). In 1986 he gave a talk with Jacques Derrida at the Pompidou Center in Paris about “Avant-garde in Japan”. In 1987 he was invited to Finland by Lahti University and then in 1990, to Frankfurt’s Literature Fair. In 1991, in his last trip before his death, Nakagami was invited

to the Buddhist Summit at Blois and then to the presentation of a play of his work 'Futakami' in Heidelberg University in Germany.

In terms of his literary stance and status, Nakagami's wayfaring broadened his worldview and developed his image as an international and cosmopolitan writer. In terms of his quest to challenge established narratives, the voyages had two effects. First, it helped Nakagami insert his marginal narratives into cultural centers initially in Japan (Tokyo) and later elsewhere. Second, it was at this time that Nakagami recognized that the marginalized situation of native Kumano shared common traits with other regions of the world. He had previously described the narratives in the *Kojiki* (712, Record of Ancient Matters), and in Kumano's oral folklore, as Japanese versions of archetypical global narratives (quoted by Hasumi, 286). But it was after his travels through the world that Nakagami linked his interpretation of local history with those of writers like Salman Rushdie, Franz Fanon, the Latin Americans, and others who came from the so-called Third World or Global South. "There is a narrative force that connects the *roji* [Nakagami's literary setting *par excellence*] with the various other *roji* or alleyways around the world. This should be understood as the dream of a Nakagami to devotedly and restlessly pursue the ideal of 'liberations' at multiple layers", states Watanabe Eiri while analyzing Nakagami's nouvelle *Ishibashi* (Stonebridge) (14)<sup>4</sup>.

In this sense, many critics have also emphasized Nakagami's capacity to simultaneously have a local-and-global viewpoint. Noya Fumiyaki, former friend of the author, asserted that Nakagami's ambiguous status as both a Kumano *burakumin* and an internationally celebrated author allowed him to blend formal and informal educations, oral and written cultures, center and periphery (82). Stephen Dodd elaborated this idea: "His double-consciousness provides him a means to conduct a far more active critique of the contradictions he finds in society at large" (4). Kawamura Jiro and Karatani Kōjin connected Nakagami's goal of transgressing from the margins into the cultural centers as an echo of the 1930s debates about overcoming Western influences that arose among Japanese intellectuals, effectively giving him attributes of both a supporter and a detractor of Modernity (231). Watanabe even suggested that Nakagami was actually looking for a transcendental synthesis, for a new type of humanism, one closely related to the principles of ecocriticism (3)<sup>5</sup>.

The questioning of established hegemonic narratives and the drawing-up of a simultaneous local-and-global viewpoint are interrelated processes. It is the questioning of local narratives about the *burakumin* that conferred Nakagami with a specific and unique literary profile in the global context. But it was because of his international presence that he was able to make deeper connections with other writers coming from similar situations, effectively transforming the global into a multiplication of interrelated localities.

This process is doubly deconstructive. While making the local *less local*, it also makes the global *less global*. Nakagami was, therefore, envisioning an alternative form of cosmopolitanism and globalization, one which did not deny the structure of the local / global, yet put it into constant questioning and reconsideration. He was always pushing the center to its limits, putting under the spotlight new margins and frontiers which in tandem could build new forms of comradeship and identification. One such frontier was Latin America.

The present paper will coin the term ‘imagined frontiers’ to make reference to the global connections of regions despite their geography and exclusively because of the literary activity of their local writers. The expression ‘imagined frontier’ makes obvious reference to Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined communities,” which suggests that nations are socially constructed entities, as most citizens feel part of a community with corresponding sentiments despite never meeting each other face-to-face. Developing on such idea, ‘imagined frontier’ presupposes the existence of *other* imagined communities or nations as stated by Anderson in a global scale. Different in their inner characteristics, though equal in terms of being socially constructed, the *other* imagined communities constitute an invitation to empathy, identification, and the discovery of common traits. The paper will first cover Nakagami’s approach to Latin America and Latin American literature as an example of developing one of such ‘imagined frontiers’ and will then analyze the actual image of the region in his novel *Sennen no yuraku*.

### **Latin America as a Model for International Recognition**

The present section will now make a history of Nakagami’s references to the ‘imagined frontier’ that Latin America was for him and will analyze how the affiliation with Latin American writers helped him develop his own image and profile as a writer. It is worth mentioning that despite having a strong interest in Latin American literature, Nakagami was actually never able to travel to the region. For him, Latin America was at all times a fictional space, a distant *topos* where he could imprint his imagination and desires, and at the same time reflect and learn out of what he believed to be common characteristics and living conditions.

Nakagami showed interest in Latin American writers and their works at least from his mentioning of Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar and his novel *Rayuela* (1963, Hopscotch) in a 1979 conversation with writers Ishihara Shintarō and Sakagami Hiroshi (Nakagami, 1980: 286). A few years later, in a 1984 conversation with writer Murakami Haruki, Nakagami made specific allusion to the writers belonging to the so-called Latin American Literary Boom, claiming to have “the same blood relationship” as them and to always think of himself when reading them (Nakagami & Murakami, 1985: 18). In the

same direction, throughout his whole life, Nakagami recurrently described the Latin American Literary Boom writers as his “brothers” with whom he shared a common ancestor: United States writer William Faulkner<sup>6</sup>.

Nakagami was also fond of Jorge Luis Borges’ literature, a writer he actually had the opportunity of meeting in a 1984 encounter that would later become part of his book of interviews, *Amerika amerika*. At that time, the writers discussed the differences between short stories and novels, the history of *haiku*, the literature of Mishima Yukio, Nakagami’s recently published novel *Sennen no yuraku* (Pleasures of a Thousand-Years, 1982), and the standpoint of Japanese intellectuals within a comprehensive perspective of world history<sup>7</sup>. A year after that encounter, Nakagami gave a conference titled *Yamai no hate – boruhesu to ratenamerika* (In the brink of illness: Borges and Latin America), in which he identified the existence of a ‘Latin American way of looking’ that could function as potential change of what he considered to be the three illnesses of the world: Europe, America and Communism (the three of which, according to Nakagami, clashed in Latin America) (quoted in Umehara, 15).

Though both the Boom writers and Borges enhanced Nakagami’s awareness of the global framework of world literature and history, it was the formers that exerted a greater influence on him, as the numerous literary critics who covered such a reception certify (Morris, 2005, 2007; Terazawa, 2015; Kato, 2016; Imai, 2017). Among those critics, the aforementioned Noya Fumiyaki enumerated the compositional and structural similarities between Nakagami and the Latin Americans. Those similarities include: the presence of violence as a narrative drive, the depiction of marginalized landscapes, the identification of the writer with characters who live in such spaces, the use of reportage and oral traditions, and the use of magical realism (1991, 80-82). When comparing the literature of his friend with that of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, Noya suggested that the creation of a literary setting that could be immediately linked to the author by readers worldwide, and the use of a distinctive local folklore to that could also help the general public identify the author, were two processes that Nakagami picked up from the Latin American writer in a deliberate strategy geared towards developing his international presence (1989, 189).

In the same direction, Nakagami’s use of magical realism is revealing, not only of the compositional and structural similarities of his literature and the Latin Americans’, as Noya pointed out, but also of his intent to further develop his international image and profile. As a literary technique that introduces magical or supernatural elements into an otherwise real or mundane setting, and which blends fiction and reality, magical realism has been understood as a consequence of Latin America’s history of oppression and as a desire to escape the dominant discourse of the colonizers (Siskind, 131). Several literary

critics have analyzed Nakagami's applications of magical realism under such a reading as well: that is, as a problematization and subversion of the 'real', constituted the latter in terms of a dominant Western discourse (Lisette Gebhardt, 1997; Yoshiko 2008). Susan Napier goes as further as to say: "We might suggest that the Latin American and Japanese impulse toward the fantastic is a literal discovery of a lost imaginary, the world that in Lacan's theories constitute the womb, the place of union before the law of the father forces the infant into the world of the Symbolic" (Napier, 1996: 11).

However, by the 1980s when Nakagami started using the technique recurrently, and specifically after García Márquez won the 1982 Nobel Prize, magical realism had lost most of its subversive potential and had turned instead into an "aesthetic artifice," using the literary device in the ways expected and demanded by international readers (Siskind, 143). Mark Morris claimed that Nakagami was probably aware of the status of magical realism as an "international commodity", hence interpreting his use of it under Pascale Casanova's conception of a World Republic of Letters in which writers compete in a quest to be recognized by cultural and literary centers (Morris, 2003). The question must be raised, therefore, as to whether using a Latin American literary technique and appealing to a Latin American imaginary (in short, charting an 'imagined frontier') was, in Nakagami's case, less of a political stance and more of a deliberate insertion in the global literature market.

In fact, Nakagami's bond with the Latin Americans was further strengthened by the intervention of French publisher Fayard, the house which had published translations of García Márquez into French and had played a key role in the Colombian winning the Nobel Prize. When Nakagami traveled to Paris in 1986 in order to sign contracts with them for a translation of *Sennen no yuraku* and a reprint of *Karekinada*, the editors of the house expressly said: "Nakagami has the potential to be a second García Márquez", (quoted in Ishikawa: 2015, 10). This statement was sustained not only by the compositional similarities between Nakagami and Latin American writers examined so far in this paper, but also by their marginal origins that one and the others had in respect to the epicenter of world culture that was Paris at that time. In other words, Fayard was also implying that Nakagami's outcaste origins were somehow a reflexion of the Latin American's Third World or Global South origins.

Nakagami himself, while in Paris but also in public declarations afterwards, criticized his assimilation with mainstream Japanese writers, while also highlighting his *burakumin* origins and condemning the Japanese historiography that had hindered his community. "When someone presents me to the outside world as a representative of Japan, it's difficult to take that on. Japan wants to show foreigners beautiful things like the Noh and the Kabuki while forgetting that all that comes from the Buraku" (Meudal), declared Nakagami in a 1989 interview with the newspaper *Libération* on the occasion of

the republication of *Karekinada* by Fayard. Although it would not be accurate to consider these declarations as a staging on Nakagami's behalf, it is clear that he was capitalizing on his outcaste origins in order to develop and define his image and profile as a writer in the French and world literary contexts. This seemed to be yet another trait that, through the publisher Fayard, Nakagami picked up from the Latin Americans.

The present section tried to show how Nakagami's interest in Latin American writers was entangled with his ambitions to position himself in the international literary arena. The many characteristics that he saw in the Latin Americans, such as setting development, use of regional folklore, and magical realism, but also the capitalization of origins, were for him methods of positioning and distinguishing himself globally. Under such light, it seems that Nakagami held a twofold understanding of Latin America as an 'imagined frontier'. On the one hand, it was a motivating space in which he envisioned common traits that simultaneously subverted the local-global pair and brought together the so-called Third World or Global South. On the other hand, Latin America was for Nakagami a model from which to learn how to obtain international recognition, a region interesting for the applications that he could make of it rather than for the affiliation that he felt with its writers. This two-sided understanding was at the same time a blending of reality and desire, identity and commodification, the self and the other. Nakagami's work that most develops this conflictive understanding of García Márquez and Borges's native region is his novel *Sennen no yuraku*, which will be analyzed in the next section.

### ***Sennen no yuraku* as an Imagined Frontier**

In 1977, years prior to getting in deeper contact with Latin American literature, Nakagami traveled from Tokyo to his native Kumano where he spent six months doing field research. As a result of this trip, Nakagami published the collection of essays and reportages *Kishū: ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari* (1978), in which he registered Kumano's oral folklore mostly narrated by elderly *burakumin* women. The collection is an extensive description of the literary setting Nakagami had introduced in *Misaki* (1976, The Cape), which later became as characteristic of him as Yoknapatawpha County was for Faulkner and Macondo was for García Márquez. Named only as *roji* (alleyways), this space consists of a system of poverty-stricken backstreets inhabited by outsiders of a rural region of Southern Japan. After *Misaki*, it served him as setting for *Hōsenka* (1980, Garden Balsam), *Chi no hate, shijō no toki* (1983, At the End of the Earth, a Time of Ecstasy), *Nichirin no tsubasa* (1984, The Wings of the Sun) and the novel to be analyzed hereafter, *Sennen no yuraku* (1983, Pleasures of A Thousand Years).

Originally serialized as separate stories from July 1980 to August 1982 in the literary



journal *Bungei, Sennen no yuraku* was edited as a collection in 1982. The title chosen, though reminiscent of García Márquez's novel *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, is probably linked to Sadaki Takahashi's 1924 historiography of the *burakumin*, *Tokushu buraku: sennenshi* (The Peculiar Burakumin: A Thousand-Year History). Nakagami's novel is narrated by both an omniscient narrator and by a second narrator which is also a character: Oryū-no-Oba, an old illiterate midwife of the *roji* who has absolute memory of all that happened within the walls of the alleyways. While the later moves freely between past and future, fact and fiction, breaking the laws concerning traditional narration, the former puts Oryū-no-Oba's tellings, gossips and fabrications into a relative, legible order. This structure of dual-narrators, one being a representative of orality and the other of *écriture*, is considered to be one of the novel's distinctive characteristics and a device that mimics Nakagami's reportages while traveling in the Kumano region (Yomota, Higashiyama).

The novel is divided into six chapters, one for each of the six Nakamoto brothers, a gang of manly, attractive and passionate young men, devoted to a life of pleasures. They are all depicted as otherworldly and divine, carriers of a birthmark that ties them to the fate of the *roji*. Once and again, the Nakamoto try to escape their bond of destiny and blood, but never can, a conflict that leads them to their premature and violent deaths. Eve Zimmerman suggested that the early deaths of the protagonists are explained because each of them is characterized by purity *and* impurity, that is, by a combination of opposites that can only be in balance for a short period of time. It is this fleeting balance of opposites, the paradox of their coexistence, concludes Zimmerman, that nourishes the narrative of the novel and makes the reader rethink about the categories that organize the world (Zimmerman, 134).

In all six chapters the characters feel a pressing urge for escape,<sup>8</sup> though it is in the fourth and fifth chapters that the novel deals exclusively with Latin America. The first of these two is "Tennin Gosui" (The Decay of the Angel), a title homonymous to Mishima's 1971 posthumous last part of his *Hōjō no umi* (Sea of Fertility) tetralogy. Nakagami's chapter tells the story of Yasuo Nakamoto, a thief who changed his name to Oriental Yasu and then traveled to Manchuria and China, where he was recruited by the army. The chapter opens with the following lines.

When she heard the wind crossing the grove from the back mountain and hitting the door and make a sound, Oryū-no-Oba knew that winter had come again to the lukewarm, narrow-as-water-well alleyways. She thought that winter had probably come as well to a ghetto similar to the *roji* but in Buenos Aires, where now lived many who had left their children behind and had traveled to a new world; a place where the wind also blew up the foliage and played with the

fluttering dazzling leaves under a sun that shone as the momentary illusion of a yellow bird. Oryū-no-Oba closed her eyes and, letting the sound of the wind pour into herself, imagined that she was riding on the wind too, soaring aimlessly as far away as possible, just as one of the leaves in her ears. (Nakagami, 1982: 127)<sup>9</sup>

This passage clearly illustrates the theme of escapism that surfaces throughout the novel and the role that Latin America plays for the characters. Oryū deliberately juxtaposes the *roji* and some random alleyway in Buenos Aires, ignoring that it's summer in Argentina when it's winter in Japan. The escape is less the ability to construct a truthful image of the latter, however, than the mere possibility to perform the juxtaposition. On another passage, Yasu has a vision of the streets of Buenos Aires in the *roji*. "He didn't remember when, but he had once slipped past a dog on the streets who was chewing on a cow bone that had rolled into the street, only to feel he was travelling to the mountains of Buenos Aires in search for gold."<sup>10</sup> Again, it is unimportant that there are no mountains in Buenos Aires. The emphasis is put on two unknown and opposite things coming in contact, on the possibility of connecting Japan and unbeaten-by-Nakagami Latin America.

The whole chapter actually overflows with positive idealizations of Latin America and with a brief lapsus of an escape there. Yasu constantly talks about the Japanese migrants living in South America, describing the region, first, as a "new world" (*shintenchi*) and, second, as "the only hostile place in the world" where he can still prove his valor (138). For him, Latin America is a place of redemption more than Japan itself. Even Oryū feels the same way. When Yasu makes her listen to contemporary Japanese music on his record player, she does not understand the lyrics and considers them to be "words from another country" (103). But when he makes her listen to Argentinian tango, she feels strangely entranced. The chapter ends with Yasu traveling to his idealized South America, only to disappear in a revolutionary movement in Buenos Aires. The escape, then, but also the narrative of discovering a new world, are both as fictional and ephemeral as the fantasies that Yasu had made in his mind.

Something similar happens in the fourth chapter, "Rapurata kitan" (A Marvelous Story from Río de la Plata). The protagonist, Shin'ichiro Nakamoto, a lumberjack and thief who steals from the rich to give to the poor, gets to know about Argentina through one of the women he flirts with, a former immigrant to South America now returned to Japan. From that moment onwards he starts fantasizing with Buenos Aires's Río de la Plata (literally, 'Silver River'), imagining that a torrent of silver flows under the *roji*, calling him to go to South America. He eventually travels there despite Oryū's advice that he would be carrying his blood even if he runs away. From Argentina, Shin'ichiro sends six letters describing the land of the Río de la Plata.

The silver river was mentioned once and again in all six letters that Oryū-no-Oba had received. She frequently looked up at the Milky Way and thought that perhaps those stars, zig-zagging and flowing to the edge of the world, were in fact that South American silver river. Reijo-san repeatedly read aloud those passages to her. The first letter was about a wide prairie, a field of grass stretching as far as the eye could see. Everything was silver. Children ate food containing lots of silver and so they shitted silver and died. The second letter talked about how you could buy women there, how they would let you tie them up and have sex with them, though they would first say: “you can only pay us with something that silver can’t buy”. The third letter was about the downfall of the Inca Empire. The fourth one was about a drunkard who turned into an eagle and carried on flying while uncovering his penis. The fifth was a sketch of Oryū-no-Oba and Reijo-san having sex. The sixth had the plans of a shop were a robber had broken in, another one from a brothel, and a lottery ticket. (Nakagami, 1982: 198)<sup>11</sup>

For Shin’ichiro, Argentina is the symbol of liberation, a land the farthest possible from the *roji* in which the most marvelous and incredible things can happen, repeating several times that the Río de la Plata is a “spring of imagination”. The above fragment was actually quoted by Nakagami to Borges during their 1984 conversation, revealing its importance for the Japanese (Nakagami: 1985, 155-6). He accompanied the quotation with another fragment of his novel in which Shin’ichiro stated that Argentina is a country opposite to Japan, hence one in which the established order (of Japan) can be subverted. Nakagami himself had hinted at this idea in his 1985 conference about the ‘Latin American way of seeing’: “If you look at one thing in the Latin American way, the situation totally changes. Right turns left, such is the result” (quoted in Umehara, 15).<sup>12</sup>

It seems that Latin America symbolized for the author something similar to Shin’ichiro’s lucubrations. Still, when returning from South America, the latter resumes his criminal life in the *roji* and confesses to Oryū that nothing he had said in his letters was true. The chapter ends with him committing suicide by drinking mercury, literally sinking the Río de la Plata in himself and ending any other subversion of order.

Yasu’s idealization of the narrative of a new world where he can find redemption unlike in his native *roji*, can very well be paralleled to the colonial discourse that sent thousands of Japanese migrants to South America since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in order to settle and give international presence and economic power to the Japanese Empire. Likewise, Shin’ichiro’s fantasies of the Río de la Plata as a land where anything can happen can be paralleled to an over-idealization of Latin America which emerged in Japan after the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s, especially among left-wing intellectuals.

In both cases, Nakagami seems to be questioning two established narratives and affirming that they do not live up to their expectations. Instead of proposing an over-idealized image of Latin America, then, he gives one that admits unfulfillment and disappointment.

And yet, despite this pattern of idealization, evasion and disappointment, *Sennen no yuraku* does posit Latin America as a metaphorical 'imagined frontier' where it is possible to connect and identify with the Other regardless of knowledge, language, and common history. It is a hybrid space constituted mainly by imagination, concepts and ideas, one that challenges the established structure of global geopolitics and the current international segmentation. Such an 'imagined frontier' does not exist as geographical space, yet it exists in discourse. It is a textual space, a frontier made up of words. It is the novel *Sennen no yuraku* itself.

## Conclusion

The current paper analyzed Nakagami's literature connected with Latin America from three different perspectives. First, it covered Nakagami's questioning of established narratives or *monogatari* and his drawing-up of a local-and-global viewpoint. These two interrelated processes made him envision affiliations and connections with other regions of the world despite of geography and thanks purely to the literary activity of writers, which were defined as 'imagined frontiers'.

Second, the current paper made a history of Nakagami's approach to Latin American writers to explain his twofold understandings of the 'imagined frontier' that for him was Latin America: both as a space of motivation and a source of learning on how to develop his profile as a writer in the global literary arena. Rather than evaluating Nakagami's consciousness in the utilization and commodification of his link with Latin America, and also of his outcaste and *burakumin* origins, the emphasis was put instead on considering the very notion of 'imagined frontier' one in which competition in the global literary market is constantly present.

Third, by doing a textual analysis of the image of Latin America in *Sennen no yuraku*, the current paper reaffirmed the dual and ambiguous image of the region the author presented, though it considered the novel to be an 'imagined frontier' in itself, a textual space where it is possible to connect and to identify with the Other regardless of knowledge, language, and common history. As an unprecedented piece of fiction in which Japan's *roji* and South America's Río de la Plata are linked solely by the power of imagination, *Sennen no yuraku* blurs the boundaries of what it means to be part of one nation, while promoting a flow of cultural difference to the other side of the frontier.

Charting this 'imagined frontier', however, is not merely a textual practice. The present paper displayed two other processes in which and it was established, fostered, and expanded. Firstly, Nakagami's travels, an experience that broadened his worldview and helped him spread out his literature globally, was also the point of departure for his 'imagined frontier' with Latin America, as it contributed to him recognizing that the situation of his native Kumano has similarities with other regions of the so-called Third World or Global South. Second, the intervention of the editors of French publisher Fayard, which also spread Nakagami's profile internationally, played a decisive role in connecting him with Latin America. Specifically, after signing contracts with Nakagami, Fayard's editors immediately associated him to García Márquez, the writer who they had helped attain the Nobel Prize. The circulation and literal movement of authors and the intervention of editors are, then, two non-textual activities most relevant when charting an 'imagined frontier', as they contribute to sustaining the affinities that the author only envisioned in his or her imagination and literature.

There is yet a third non-textual activity most important when charting an 'imagined frontier'. That is: the sustained tradition of literary criticism which studied and analyzed the relationship of the author with the region he or she felt connected to. In the case of Nakagami specifically, literary critic and former friend of Nakagami, Noya Fumiyaki, widely quoted in the current paper, contributed to developing the image of the writer as one who looked for coincidences with Latin American writers. Literary criticism, therefore, plays also a decisive role in the establishment and expansion of an 'imagined frontier', as it constantly redevelops and reinterprets the meanings and connections that the literary texts leave behind.

Nakagami Kenji's interest in Latin America and his charting of an 'imagined frontier' with the region is one of the many examples of the possible connections that culture and literature can put forth. The door is now open for this category to be used on other authors all over the world who also felt affiliations with other writers despite of geography and primarily in the name of a global, human condition.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The term *burakumin* makes reference to rural communities historically linked to occupations that were considered impure, such as undertakers, tanners and butchers. Though ethnically no different from other Japanese, during the Edo Period (1603-1868) the Tokugawa government's rigid social stratification considered them as descendants of an impure blood caste, effectively segregating them from society. In the Meiji Period (1868-1912), the newly established government banned the caste system and gave them legal recognition following the Kaihōrei (Emancipation Edict). However, as an unexpected consequence of the Edict, the *burakumin* lost the monopoly they had held over their occupations, worsening their already impoverished social and economic situations. In 1922, they organized the *Zenkoku Suiheisha* (Levelers Association of Japan), through which they made demands to confront discrimination and to reclaim better living conditions. During the prewar years, the Japanese Empire, founded on a multi-ethnic discourse, found it useful to incorporate the *burakumin* as members of the Japanese nation and yet letting them preserve a different self-defined identity. In 1942, however, the government passed an anti-movement legislation which dissolved the *Suiheisha*. It was only in 1946 that ex-members of the latter founded the *Buraku Kaihō Dōmei* (Buraku Liberation League), renamed in 1955 as *Buraku Kaihō Zenkoku Inikai* (Buraku Liberation National Committee). In 1979, the *Zenkairon* or *Zenkoku Buraku Kaihō Undō Rngōkai* (National Buraku Liberation Alliance) was formed in direct connection to the Japanese Communist Party and by members of the Buraku Liberation League that considered that outsiders to the *burakumin* community should also be allowed to become members of *burakumin* associations. During the years of economic growth and with the ever-growing need for a cheap workforce by the capitalist system, the *burakumin* were gradually integrated into Japanese society. It is estimated that there are 3 million *burakumin* in contemporary Japan (cf. Tomotsune, Yokochi Samuel).
- 2 *Monogatari* is a complex concept, though it generally makes references to narrated tales, used as a frame for poetry and poetic exchanges in classical writing. Closely tied to the oral tradition, they retell historical events through fictionalized stories.
- 3 Yomota highlights that in the novella *Misaki*, for instance, such a transformation occurs when Akiyuki sleeps with his half-sister, which at the same time symbolized a revenge against his father's impositions and a rewriting of the creation myth of the *Kojiki*, in which god brother and sister Izanagi and Izanami give birth to the Japanese archipelago.
- 4 All quotes from the Japanese originals are my own translation. The complete quote goes as follows: "The novelist [Nakagami] links *roji* [Kumano's alleyways] and *hisabetsu buraku* [discriminated people of the villages], colony and Third World. By quoting Franz Fanon and the Black Panthers, the novel [*Ishihashi*] understands and gives sense to the *roji* and *hisabetsu buraku* from a global perspective, connecting their 'liberation' with that of other movements around the world and making them mirrors of one another. That is to say, there is a narrative force that connects the *roji* with the various other *roji* or alleyways around the world. This should be understood as the dream of a novelist devotedly and restlessly pursues the ideal of 'liberations' through multiple layers of intermediation"

同時に、ここでの小説家は、路地／被差別部落を、植民地や第三世界と結びつける。小説は、路地／被差別部落を世界史的な視野で意味付け、思考し、ファノン、ブラックパンサー等を媒介に、路地／

被差別部落の「解放」を、世界的な「解放」の動きに連ね、そして、それを鏡に問い直そうとするのである。言わば、路地を世界中のさまざまな路地と切りながらつなげる想像力。そこに読み取るべきは、幾重もの媒介行為を通じて、「解放」の理想を、ひたすらに、飽くことがなく追いつける小説家の夢である。(14)

- 5 Watanabe quotes Nakagami's essay "Shin ningenshugi" (A true humanism): "The world is in crisis. We are heading to our downfall. And the Earth is being destroyed. During this crisis, downfall, destruction, will we, human beings, remain endlessly impervious to our beloved animals and plants, to this wind, to this sky, to earth, water, and light, to all the things that live together with us? We have made a huge mistake. Modernity and the rampancy of our blind belief in science... or rather... a blind belief in Modernity itself has taken us to make this huge error. We proclaim here, from the sacred ground of Kumano, a true humanism [...]. Humans are free, are equal, are vessels of love. The sacred ground of Kumano is the place that gives birth to a true humanism, that raises it, that fills it with affection. The light of Kumano. The water and wind of Kumano. Let's listen to the voice of the rocks. Let's listen to old stories [*monogatari*] being murmured by the trees".

世界は危機に遭遇している。私たちの総てが破滅に向かっている。地球が破壊しかかっている。この危機や破壊や壊滅の中に私たち、人間、共に生きてきた愛する動物、植物、この風、この空、土、水、光が永久に閉ざされ続けるのか。何かが大きく間違っていたのだ、近代と共に蔓延した科学盲信、いや近代そのものの盲信がこの大きな錯誤を導いたのだ。私たちはここに霊地熊野から真の人間主義を提唱する。(中略) 人間は自由であり、平等であり、愛の器である。霊地熊野は真の人間を生み、育て、慈しみを与えてくれる所である。熊野の光。熊野の水、熊野の風。岩に耳よせ声を聞こう。たぶの木のとそよぎ語る柱古の物語を聞こう。

- 6 For a deeper analysis of the relationship between Nakagami and the Mississippian writer, see Terazawa, 2015; Kato, 2016; Imai, 2017.
- 7 "Only 1200 years have passed since Nara's Great Buddha was built. When I think from a world history perspective, I often feel that Japan is a latecomer. Its history is shorter than world history. So, I wonder where is the Japanese writer bound for, what his or her fate actually is" (Nakagami: 1985, 147).

あの奈良の大仏は、建立されてからまだ千二百年ぐらいなんですね。僕は世界史ということから考えると、日本というのは何かはずれにあるんだなということをよく感じるんです。世界史に比べて歴史が短い。それがどこかで日本人の作家を縛るといえるのか、日本の作家の宿命のようなものとしてあるという感じがするんですけどね。

- 8 The first chapter, "Hanzō no tori" (Hanzō's Bird), tells the story of Hanzō, a promiscuous man who dies in the middle of a love-triangle with one of his many women. The second chapter, "Rokudō no tsuji" (The Intersection of the Six Realms), tells the story of Miyoshi, a drug-user who shuts himself away after murdering a man until he decides to hang himself. The third chapter, "Tengu no matsu" (The Pine of the *Tengu*), tells the story of Fumihiko, a man who murders a shamaness that he had brought to live with him, only to cut his own throat afterwards. The fourth and fifth chapters, "Tennin Gosui" (The Decay of the Angel)" and "Rapurata kitan" (Beautiful Story from Río de la Plata), to be analyzed in the next paragraphs, depict Oriental Yasu and Shin'ichiro, who both want to travel to South America and end up dying there in political uprisings. The sixth chapter, "Kannakamui no tsubasa" (The Wings of the



God of Thunder) tells the story of young Tatsuo, a miner who travels to an Ainu community in Hokkaidō and ends up dying during a protest

9 裏山の雑木の繁みを風が渡り戸板に当って音を立てているのを耳にするとオリウノオバはいつもこの狭い井戸のようにぬるんだ路地に冬が来たとなり、路地に子を置いて新天地に出ていった者らの住みついたブエノスアイレスにも冬が来て路地と同じだというゲットウでも、風が葉を吹き散らし舞い上げ、一瞬の幻の黄色の鳥のように日に輝き眩ゆくざらめく葉を颯のように飛ばしているのだろうと思うのだった。オリウノオバは眼を閉じ、風の音に耳を傾けてさながら自分の耳に舞い上った葉のように風によって遠くどこまでも果たしなく浮いたまま飛んでいくのだと思った。

10 “When listening to tango on the record player, Oriental Yasu felt his blood heat up. He opened the sliding paper door and the scenery of the familiar alleyways, with its piss-stained fences and thatched rooftops (for no one had money to buy a single tile) appeared to be those of the streets of Buenos Aires. He didn’t remember when, but he had once slipped past a dog on the streets who was chewing on a cow bone that had rolled into the street, only to feel he was travelling to the mountains of Buenos Aires in search for gold. Now, Oriental Yasu heard children voices outside of the window and fully opened the door, though he saw not Buenos Aires but the alleyways, where some children had tied a string to a meatless cow skull and where dragging it around. They had placed the skull by a wild bush rose, they had tied a straw rope to it and where waiting behind a house’s shadows for a dog that was running around to be caught by their trap” (p. 142-3).

蓄音機でタンゴを聴いているとオリエントの康はむずむずと血がさわぎ、障子戸を開けると昔から見なれた路地の小便臭い板塀や瓦を買う金がないので杉皮ぶきの屋根の見える変哲もない路地の風景がブエノスアイレスの町並のように見えてきて、それがいつ見たのか分からぬが、自分が、牛の骨が転がり犬が一心にかじっている脇を擦り抜けて黄金を堀にブエノスアイレスの山へ向かうような気がする。オリエントの康は窓の外で子供らの声にするのに気づき、障子戸をあけ、ブエノスアイレスのそこではなく路地のそこで子供らがきれいに肉をそぎ落とした牛の頭蓋骨にひもをくっつけて引きずり、野茨のような薔薇の木の脇に置き荒縄を結んでわなをつくり家かげに身をひそめて路地の中を群れて走り廻る犬を捕獲しようとしているのを見る。(142-3頁)

11 オリウノオバが受け取った六通の絵入り手紙に銀の河の事は繰り返して出て来ていたが、オリウノオバはしきりに天の川をあおぎ見て南米の銀の河とは天の川が地球の端まで来て折れ曲り流れ込んでいるのかもしれないと思い、礼如さんにくり返し読んでもらった文字の部分を反復暗誦した。一通め。広い広い見はるかすかざり草しかない草原を突然見た。何もかも銀。子供らは銀の沢山含んだ食物を食うから銀の糞をして死ぬ。二通め。女お見えるというので行ってみたら縛らせてくれ姦らせて、金は金銀などに置き換えられない物で払えと言う。三通め。インカの滅亡。四通め。イーグルに変わってしまった泥酔男がチンポ丸出しで飛んでいた。五通め。オリウノオバと礼如さんのおめこの図。六通め。盗人に入った時の店の図面と淫売宿と宝くじの番号。

12 一つの物事をラテン的に見るということをするれば、局面が全然違って見えるということです。右のものが左になる、そういう状態になると思います。