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Alejandra Bottinelli Wolleter Subaltern Apocalypses
and Cosmopolitics
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Thinking Subaltern Apocalypses Today

The main question surrounding this piece of writing is: what are we to do with a radically post-enlightened world in which the elimination of particular populations has become banal and faces absolute impunity and where rhetoric itself is being disqualified because the art of persuasion has been submitted to pure violence?

Günther Anders pointed out that the present—his present, our present?—was marked by a “Promethean breach,” which he understood as “a synchronicity of the man with his world of products” (Anders 2003, 32). Human beings, he explained, “can create the hydrogen bomb, but we cannot imagine the consequences; between acting and feeling[.] Our feeling lags behind our acting: we can kill by bombing hundreds of thousands, but not cry for them, not feel sorry for them” (Ibid).²

How, then, do we imagine the end of times today when we do not have to imagine it because the end is entirely ‘exposed’ and brought into the light? How do we make-image when the image itself has been undressed, de-realized as an imitation, as *imago*? We need to think attentively about the civilizatory effects of this hyperexposal, attempting to reach another comprehension of Anders’s idea of the “naked apocalypse.” Since he refers to “[a] concept of apocalypse that consists of a simple end of the world that does not imply the opening of a new positive situation (the situation of a ‘kingdom’)” (2011, 83), which thus dissolves all language; then, we are currently dealing with an end of the world that is stripped *ex ante* of its representation, insofar as it is subtracted from all foundation and all

¹ Following Raymond Williams, I am aware of the complexity of the uses that the word “peoples” has had throughout history and at different junctures, especially in the European sphere, in the disparaging use (in the physical model) as a synonym for “the low,” (as in lowly) as Williams explains it: “This physical model has determined much of the vocabulary of social description; compare *standing, status, eminence, prominence* and the description of social *levels, grades, estates and degrees*. At the same time more particular terms of description of certain ‘low’ groups have been extended: *plebeian* from Latin *plebs*; *villein* and *boor* from feudal society, COMMON (q.v.) added the sense of ‘lowness’ to the sense of mutuality, especially in the phrase ‘the common people’” (Williams 1983, 192). However, aware of this ambiguity, but following Badiou’s “positive” notion, we will call “people” both those who, insofar as they destroy their own inertia, become the body of political novelty, and all those who, without

kingdom at the same time, an apocalypse that dispenses with all justification and all transcendence. What effect does this form of the end have in this generation, in contemporary *pueblos*, broadly said, when it ‘happens’ to them as *it* happens, for example, in Gaza, Palestine? Probably, the first and most evident effect is fear, a new, fundamental fear that equally cannot find a language.

I place this introduction here to encourage a closer examination of Latin American communities, who also belong to these contemporary peoples in the midst of this language debacle.

The Apocalyptic Device: Heteroclitic and Paradoxical

As Adolfo Mantilla points out, the Apocalypse, in its role as a “vision-image-reality device,” orders a temporary system oriented by an eschatological principle, which constructs a linear time. Its major strength would be, he adds, in the articulation of crisis with catharsis through means of revelation (2024, 79). By ‘crisis,’ we mean a moment of definition, interregnum; ‘catharsis’ which refers to the ritual purification or purge in works of tragedy: the purifying and liberating effect brought on by extreme emotions. On the one hand, then, the apocalyptic *dispositif* works with the certainty granted by time oriented in this way. On the other hand, it alludes to the emergency of a critical time/space where, on the contrary, certainties are destabilized. This leads to a need for a definition. If we follow this imagination of apocalyptic time as something that will irrecusably come and that, in Christianity, since John of Patmos will do this through catharsis, it is time to purge the social body.

In this sense, I propose that the apocalypse as a representational *dispositif* contains a heteroclitic strength;³ that is strange, diverse, and also paradoxical and torn, or syncopathic:⁴ it condenses justice through the expectation of punishment of the unjust; that is, the transformation and the turning of the world after the pain; at the same time, the spectacularization of the “judgement” itself in the cruel overexposure of punishment and the establishment of a new order as the prescription of a single world, reverberates in the establishment of a restrictive space/time, equal to itself, punitive, marked in origin by vengeful catharsis. People under regimes of extreme violence, as Fabian Scheidler explains, have imagined the apocalypse as a resource to end social suffering, but, as Gilles Deleuze proposes on his side, their apocalyptic imagination has, at the same time, collapsed into prescriptions of how to imagine a world destined and

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totally “detaching” themselves from this inertia, are nevertheless not really included in the *dispositif* of the “sovereign people” as constituted by the State (Badiou 2014, 14–15).

2 All references to both primary and secondary foreign language texts have been freely translated by the author of this essay.

3 “For Foucault, the *dispositif*, as a network of relations, is not stable, but mobile and dynamic. Its components, as well as the set of relations between them, vary according to the level of efficacy attained in a given efficacy at a given juncture” (Vega 2017, 139).

4 “The representation is a carrier of antagonistic or paradoxical structural effects, which could be defined as ‘syncopations’ at the level of its semiotic functioning, or symptomatic ‘tears’ in a more meta-physical and anthropologic level” (Didi-Huberman 2014, 74).

permanent: the kingdom of universal justice. Commenting on D. H. Lawrence's book *Apocalypse*, Deleuze joins the Englishman in his criticism of the Christian device inaugurated by John of Patmos, highlighting this work as a complex revenge of the weak, through the figure of the Sheep that, before becoming a sacrificer, was sacrificed:

What the Apocalypse [by D.H. Lawrence] wields is the revindication of the "poor" or "weak" because they are not what they seem; they are not humble or miserable, but rather more than fearsome people that do not have a soul other than the collective one. Amongst the most beautiful pages by Lawrence, we find those of the Sheep: John of Patmos announces the Lion of Judah, but a sheep is what arrives, a horned sheep that roars like a lion, that has become singularly astute, all the more cruel and fearsome because it is presented as a sacrificed victim, and not as a sacrificer or executioner (Deleuze 1996, 61–62).

Here, the popular forces have been conquered by this "carnivorous sheep, the sheep that bites, and that shouts 'help, what have I done to you? It was for your own good and for our common cause'" (1996, 62). Here, Deleuze is interested in relieving the system of Judgement in John's writing, as the invention of a new image of power, based on a "[w]ill to destroy, a will to introduce oneself in every corner, the will of being the last word forever and ever" (1996, 63). This is a circular system, that uses, as its arm, its own subdued majorities, which in turn become instruments in the production of new victims. For the French author "[t]he Apocalypse has won, we have never managed to exit the system of judgement" (Deleuze 1996, 65). Following this direction, alongside Deleuze, we should ask ourselves how to exit the system of trial that is implied in the apocalyptic device. At the same time, how will it be possible to replace a heteroclitic apocalyptic imagination, that is, a language that shapes and that dares to imagine a kingdom.

The Extended Post-Apocalypse of the Peoples of Latin American

Latin Americans, who have been submitted to physical, cultural, and material apocalyptic punishment (cathartic, purifying) are victims of radical forms of violence that have destroyed their worlds entirely. As a result, they find themselves forever exposed to acts of disappearing, threatened even in their representation—as Georges Didi-Huberman has elaborated

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on. The peoples of Abya Yala, thus, find themselves in the trance of permanently (re)constructing their worlds in an extended post-apocalyptic situation. They are situated after the disaster which, however, works at the same time as an eschatological interregnum in the threat of the new disaster.⁵ It is an interregnum in which, as Antonio Gramsci warned, all kinds of morbid phenomena emerge;⁶ because everything is open, illuminated (ready for ‘vision’ and visionary imagination), in crisis, and it is tense, that is, appearing in lacerating irritation with the premises that have supported it.

I propose that the peoples of Abya Yala⁷ elaborate their present and future, transferred by the forces of this image-vision-reality or apocalyptic device, which is heteroclitic and paradoxical. Maintaining the memory of having been victims of the destruction of their worlds and, at the same time, having submitted to the material reproduction of fear in the daily experience of threat to their existence and representation; the peoples of Abya Yala produce this same social suffering as a source of new figurations of the end of times in fictions. This includes those fictions about transformation that enrich their images in the paradoxical *Apocalypse-dispositif*.

Therefore, understanding the relationships that Latin American peoples have with the apocalypse demands assuming two methodological premises: firstly, one must comprehend that most peoples placed in this Abya Yala territory inhabit the post-apocalypse, which means the apocalypse, according to them, has already taken place. Their ancestors are either those who survived the mass kidnapping that displaced millions of people from Africa and then enslaved them throughout all of the Americas, from Canada to Biobío or those survivors of the Hispanic-Lusitanian Conquest, which, we know (do we know it well enough though?) brought with it various ailments. They are also survivors of the ‘Second Conquest’ that extinguished, yet again, thousands of people and whole communities during the nineteenth century and throughout the entire Southern Cone and beyond. Some of them are also children and grandchildren of survivors of the uncountable types of criminal extractivism that enslaved and mutilated entire populations: in the rubber tree plantation of the Amazon; or in the massacres that were developed by states and businessmen in Bahian Sertão, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego amongst many others. They are also survivors of the civic-military dictatorships in the Southern Cone, which disappeared, murdered, and tortured a whole subcontinent, submitting thousands of people to systematic fear. This transnational organization of death was named after an imposing Andean bird: Cóndor, which was wholly desired, and its state terrorism regimes projected, in

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⁵ ‘Disaster,’ I recall, comes from *dis* and *astro* (star). It refers to a stellar cataclysm; in ancient cultures it is always connected to the announcement of calamities. It is, therefore, always an omen or prophecy; it is always, to a certain degree, threatening to be a closing of time.

⁶ “Se la classe dominante ha perduto il consenso, cioè non è più” dirigente “, ma unicamente” dominante “, detentrica della pura forza coercitiva, ciò appunto significa che le grandi masse si sono staccate dalle ideologie tradizionali, non credono più a ciò in cui prima credevano ecc. La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati.” (Gramsci 1977, 311).

⁷ When I say the peoples of Abya Yala, I mean the subjects adjourned economically, socially, culturally, sexually; those who usually inhabit the peripheries of our cities or the fields, and whose genealogy was submitted to the radical violence of diverse genocides.

time and space, a system of injustice, despise, and structural violence that had also been a result of the former genocides, and that still oppresses the same peoples to this very day. Seen through this lens, the apocalypse has already taken place for our peoples. And it did not stop. It happened again and again and again as a kind of monstrous repetition.

My work arises mainly from the question of how to ‘make visible’ an imagination in the process of transformation of/by these peoples, who are in revolt against the status quo of neo-colonial culture, liberal democracy, and hyper-capitalism in the Southern Cone? How not to fail to see, to show, to assume, that we are talking about experiences of an extended post-apocalypse, which has become a space/time of unresolved anxiety, where insecurity, threat, fear, and violence prevail, but in the framework of which said peoples continue to search for and to investigate possibilities of survival through the construction of fictions and images that resist this destruction. How can we do justice to the many revelations proposed by these peoples?

And yet more importantly: Why is it so important to do justice to these revelations? Why should we bring to the fore the works of fiction of the post-apocalyptic margins, of the confines of territories? What do they reveal to us other than the repetition, as Derrida said, of the system of judgement? In his enquiry into the forms of the imaginal disappearance of peoples, Georges Didi-Huberman has emphasized that an emancipatory thought must dedicate itself to ‘making sensitive’ the passage of peoples by ‘making visible,’ he points out, “the failures, the places [...] through which, declaring themselves as ‘impotence,’ particular peoples affirm both what they lack and what they desire” (2014, 90). Showing, then, not only the certainties of the peoples of Abya Yala (their judgements as fictions of punishment) but also engaging with their contradictions, shortcomings, openings, and failures in meta-apocalyptic fictions that allow them to observe from the outside their destined place in the system of judgement, and, in turn, to destabilize it, is paramount.

It is also of fundamental interest to understand how these peoples produce such radical worlds, which the one-dimensional culture of hyper-capitalism and its institutions cannot even grasp. There is no place in the present capitalist imaginary but reduce people to mere residual effects of the functioning of the market, cannot comprehend a post-apocalyptic population who has been resisting and making worlds despite having been condemned to the ghetto, to a mere electoral force, a reserve army, or territories of residue. Because the peoples of Abya Yala are held in a state of constant threat, they emerge radically plural in the face of the homogenizing fantasy of a world and in defense of their many own worlds.

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Fictions of the Apocalypse: Recomposing the Cosmopolitical Relationship from the Margin

Marginalized peoples are surrounded by ghosts. Such ghosts bear the sign of those that Fisher (2014) spoke of: those that come from a future that we have never realized, transmuted into ghosts of the past, destroyed promises that appear together with the phantasmagoria of a future that has ceased to be a promise. They become, as has been made clear by the recently elected president of Argentina, pawns in a game of Russian roulette that only the brave play. How, then, does one live time when one lives in this doubly threatened reality? People make-life, make-world *in* and *from* this reality. They do so post-apocalyptically, and they cosmopolitically construct forms of worlds and relationships that have allowed them to continue existing and creating. This is demonstrated by some contemporary Argentinean and Chilean fictions, which are sure to be revisited today by mystagogic political scientists in an attempt to ‘decipher’ the mystery of those peoples who, at best, have tried to ‘integrate,’ but whose language they are far from being able to *hear* and understand.

Many peoples construct cosmoses,⁸ they make alternate worlds out of those social spaces considered ghettos by metropolitan societies (also in the South). This is fictionalised in Juan Diego Incardona’s novel *El campito* (2009), which dislocates the traditional suburban territorial unit of greater Buenos Aires⁹ that Borges developed to some extent in the notion of *orillas* (shores). In the novel the territory is transformed into a series of phantasmatic worlds, almost planets, Peronist neighbourhoods, whose inhabitants, activists who had escaped the 1955 *coup d’état* and Peronist fighters of the following decades (Pariante 2019, 332), have been adapting to sustain themselves as communities in post-apocalyptic resistance to the constant threat to their existence. The adaptation has been corporal, environmental, moral, aesthetic. Thus, with their own norms and diverse species of beings, human and semi-human, of singular, mutant natures, the inhabitants of the Peronist ‘neighborhoods’ behind the city limits have resisted the threat unleashed against them by the ‘oligarchy’ from beyond the Campito, embodied in the form of monstrous aggressive agents, military and biological interventions, the harassment of spy satellites and the panoptic organization with iron systems of control, circulation, and access.

The novel does not concentrate on the multimodal violence exercised by this elusive power of the oligarchy, which represents, for everyone, an almost omnipresent threat, but, which puts pressure, above all else, on the worlds constructed on the shores and between the roads of the Campito. As Eliana Pariante has pointed out, this space “is not posed in terms of

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⁸ As Israel Rodríguez-Giralt, David Rojas and Ignacio Farías explain, for Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, “[t]he particle ‘cosmo’ refers to the specific need to include a concern that refers to the different, to multiple and divergent worlds, populated by tensions and articulations” (Rodríguez-Giralt et. al. 2014, 7).

⁹ This corresponds to the Southern cities of the urban agglomeration of Buenos Aires, that surrounds the capital and possesses the highest population density of the entire country.

the real-imaginary dichotomy, but rather as a cadastral one—secret/hidden” (2019, 332). Indeed, the village worlds that make up the space/time of Campito function as a secret, as veiled forms of life, and as clandestine cosmoses. The work thus proposes “an intuitive, consensual and communal geography” (2019, 334) that inverts notions of heroism: “‘If the upper or middle classes—the dwarves said—were to get into this infected mud, they would not survive more than half an hour [...] [...] Only we, who were made of their mud, their water, their filth, could love this land’” (Incardona 2009, 125). The dynamic not only repositions the actors of the ‘Judgement,’ but also unifies people around a communal narrative: It is the very act of oral narration illuminating a subject who has crossed the ages, sustaining his wandering between the shores of the Campito as a principle of freedom, and maintaining his humanity which was also somehow ‘donated’ by the interaction with these fantastic beings. They receive him in each of the Peronist neighborhoods and bring out precisely the cosmopolitical power that sustains these marginalized peoples, who, even when subjected to permanent war, which Isabelle Stengers has called “the perpetual state of war that makes capitalism reign” (2017, 18), assume a Dantesque ‘vision’ of existence in this work by Incardona. As such, they construct this Campito, as a space ‘between’ roads, between peoples, as a strategic erasure that is articulated here as a cosmos, as a sensitive place/time that enables the shelter of the bodies of the harassed (Peronists) and their heterogeneous existence. They emerge, therefore, as a post-apocalyptic cosmopolitical power that is capable of refusing the repetition of punishment and Judgement through forms of solidarity among different beings.¹⁰

In “Desaparición de la población Santo Tomás, La Pintana” [Disappearance of the Santo Tomás suburb, La Pintana], a poem belonging to the volume *Compro fierro* [I Buy Iron] (2007) by Juan Carreño, the speaker shares the apocalyptic experience of the marginal neighborhood:

Conocí a la Chica días antes
del fin del mundo.
Cristo había llegado hace tiempo
y vivía en la Santo Tomás.
Por esos días la gente andaba en la magia
aplaudiéndose la cabeza.
Éramos pura bulla.
Vimos los supermercados transformarse en perreras
y los carros de sopaipillas
en palomares.
Sólo alcanzaba para quedarnos escuchando árboles.

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¹⁰ “Under a non-specific and subjective denomination, diluting its borders and disguising its own geographical extension, the Campito does not cease to want to demarcate an outside and an inside of both spatial and temporal weight” (Pariente 2019, 333).

Por esos días ya estábamos todos tan
solos
que ni nos dimos cuenta
cuando de un sablazo
el cielo
se nos rajó (8).

I met the Girl days before
the end of the world.
Christ had arrived a long time ago
and lived in the Santo Tomás slum.
In those days people went about in magic
clapping their heads.
We were pure hullabaloo.
We saw the supermarkets turn into kennels
and the sopaipillas carts
into pigeon lofts.
It was just enough to listen to the trees.
In those days we were all so
alone
that we didn't even notice
when all at the stroke
the sky
has cracked on us (8).

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The speaker from the Chilean suburb warns us: the apocalypse has already happened, the prophecy is fulfilled, and the sky has fallen. The apocalypse had come, but then another one came, which slashed the sky over the inhabitants of the neighborhood. We don't know what happened to them, but it could be, as in Juan Carreño's first novel *Budnik* (2018), that the post-apocalyptic condition is appropriated in unpredictable ways by the inhabitants of the margin. For example, in the novel, the main character, who is a child, decides to escape from the violent environment of his home to live in an uninhabited place inside a cement pipe—one of those regularly used for sewage: "I went to live in a Budnik cement pipe behind or in front of the Antumapu plantations. I lived alone and drew what I wanted. I was totally free. And I lived on rubbish," (17) on what people threw away.

These are the lives of the people that the enlightened society—as the Argentinean writer and filmmaker, the 'poeta villero' César González, has exposed—has not even begun to know, let alone try to understand,

its tragic character of post-apocalyptic peoples,¹¹ survivors, in the sense proposed by Aby Warburg, considered as survival, insofar as, as Didi-Huberman explains, “Survival, then, opens history [...] survival makes history more complex: it frees a kind of ‘margin of indeterminacy’ in the historical correlation of phenomena” (2009, 76), where the surviving pathos (Warburg’s *Pathosformeln*) consists of those “Motions, emotions ‘fixed as if by an enchantment’ (Didi-Huberman 2009, 183). Forms that are always staged, from bodies that, in the face of threat, “then become untamed, lying between cancellation and presence, state of siege and resistance, prostration and refusal.” (Festa 2023, par. 35)

Therefore, the villages portrayed in films such as *Diagnóstico esperanza* (2013), *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (2014), *Lluvia de jaulas* (2019), and most of César González’s filmography more broadly, show a communicative vocation that uses *pathos* to overcome the stigmatizing barriers that have been placed on the villages of the margin as ravaged by the death impulse. On the contrary, despite the fact that for some time now “the sky has been torn,” as Carreño’s poem put it, the people, say the villagers actors/authors in González’s films, do not stop searching and continue to be animated by the impulses of life, searching for pleasure and happiness, even in the midst of the crudest violence, and constructing alternative worlds which, although constantly threatened by the system of judgement (embodied here in the form of permanent punishment of the social and individual body through the prison and police systems), are also permanently escaping from it in the form of solidarity and encounter in friendly enjoyment.

As I have said previously, the peoples of Abya Yala, subjected to apocalyptic experience, have constructed a relationship with the apocalyptic image-device that is heteroclitite and diverse. As such, they use said device to understand themselves in this extended post-apocalypse that is an after the end of the worlds, in a context in which their own integration into the ‘world’ is a question, a pain, and also a mystical search. In his testimonial fiction *El niño resentido* (2023), César González deploys these “mystical rochos [drunks],” in the streets of the city in a cathartic performance:

Dueños de todo en medio de la nada. Autores y espectadores de la misma tragedia. Socios en la caída, pero en una caída entre perla, zafiros y dorados trofeos de guerra. Queríamos saborear los límites más dulces del abismo, aunque eso implicara morir pronto. [...] Los ojos de nuestros amigos muertos nos miraban a toda hora [...]. Todo era efímero y perpetuo (2023, 154–155).¹²

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¹¹ Amongst his essay *El Fetichismo de la marginalidad* (2021); his filmography: *Al borde* (2023) and his fictionalized autobiography: *El niño resentido* (2023).

¹² “Owners of everything in the middle of nothing. Authors and spectators of the same tragedy. Partners in the fall, but in a fall between pearl, sapphires and golden war trophies. We wanted to taste the sweetest limits of the abyss, although this would mean dying soon. [...] The eyes of our dead friends stared at us at every hour. [...] Everything was ephemeral and perpetual.”

Recomposing the future would imply discussing the very notions of apocalypse as it has been read teleologically; as developed by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, for whom, as Natalia Castro Picón has pointed out, peoples have constructed another type of apocalyptic cultural experience, which allows them to make anticipation an incentive for current action, a call that “commands ‘to begin’, to bear witness, to be there, to wait in preparation and to participate by working” (De Martino in Castro Picón 2022, 57). Therefore, from De Martino’s point of view and in the orbit of Walter Benjamin, the biggest problem for us today would be

the interruption of the intersubjective links that make it possible to order the world in common. This impossibility of culturally experiencing the world is what obstructs the crisis-reintegration dialectic that condemns the West to an apocalypse without an eschaton, incapable of transcending beyond its crisis, prevented in the face of its own exhaustion (Castro Picón 2022, 57).

Overcoming capitalist realism, that is, “the catastrophic impasse of a society from which all future was drained, and from whose possibilities the majority were excluded” (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 2019, 81). would then involve recognising the future that peoples have been building also as an alternation of their own time, conjugated in the cosmological space of all possibilities, as a *conjura tiempera* [*timekeeper conjuring*] (temporo-ambiental), that is, as a material, sensual, and imaginal weft and call.

This implies recovering the apocalyptic imagination as a creative thought that, in its imaginative radicality, can think of new futures and provide a cosmopolitical link that gathers the power that peoples have been developing in their resistance during this extended post-apocalypse. Similarly, the peoples who, in Federico Cuatlacuatl’s¹³ ongoing series of short experimental films and photos *Tiemperos del Antropoceno* [Timekeepers of the Anthropocene] (2021), announce themselves as the “anthropological invaders of our own invaded history,” reveal to us their post-apocalyptic character while traveling through time and space, inhabiting a “dimension between existence,” and going to the past in the future, to their *Teopansingo*, to recover their histories, to return and be able to subsist. This is not about attempting to conjure disaster but about returning to life *despite* the disaster’s long journey. Assumed to be beings of another atmosphere: ‘illegal aliens,’ ‘cultural nomads,’ ‘smugglers, smuggled, smuggling,’ ‘pilgrims of time and space,’ ‘navigators of uncertainty,’ ‘aliens,’ these people inhabit this interregnum—this latency of another civilization.

¹³ <https://www.cuatlacuatl.com/>

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