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<https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5302.09>

The Heart of Tenoch: A Story of Aztec Cosmotronics

ABSTRACT

This article frames storytelling as cosmotechnics, as a culturally situated technical activity that unifies cosmic order and moral dimensions through technical activity. Drawing on Yuk Hui's concept of technodiversity and on anthropological critiques of universal technology, it reads Nahua/Aztec narrative practices, especially *amoxtili* codices and their performative re-narration, as world-making interfaces that store memory, coordinate movement and sustain collective identities when official archives are fragmented or destroyed. A short circular story, based on readings of migration codices, invites the reader to join the journey from Aztlán to the founding of Tenochtitlan and into contemporary Indigenous and Chicano mobilities across the U.S.–Mexico border. By treating the codex not only as an archive but as a technology of migration, the article argues that narrative remains a transportable counter-archive capable of reconfiguring cosmos, morality, and technics under conditions of displacement.

KEYWORDS: cosmotechnics, storytelling, Aztec cosmology, migration, archive

STRESZCZENIE

Serce Tenocha: opowieść o azteckiej kosmotecnice

Niniejszy artykuł ujmuje opowiadanie historii jako kosmotecnikę, czyli kulturowo usytuowaną działalność techniczną, która jednoczy porządek kosmiczny i zobowiązanie moralne. Odwołując się do koncepcji technoróżnorodności Yuk Huia oraz do antropologicznych krytyk uniwersalnej technologii, tekst interpretuje nahuzańskie/azteckie praktyki narracyjne, zwłaszcza kodeksy amoxtili i ich performatywne ponowne opowiadanie, jako interfejsy światotwórcze, które przechowują pamięć, koordynują przemieszczanie się i podtrzymują tożsamości zbiorowe, gdy oficjalne archiwa ulegają fragmentacji lub zniszczeniu. Krótka, kolista opowieść, oparta na lekturach kodeksów migracyjnych, zaprasza czytelnika do włączenia się w wędrówkę z Aztłanu do założenia Tenochtitlanu, a następnie do współczesnych mobilności rdzennych społeczności i Chicanos ponad granicą USA–Meksyk. Traktując kodeks nie tylko jako archiwum, lecz także jako technologię migracji, artykuł dowodzi, że narracja pozostaje

przenośnym kontrarchiwum, zdolnym do rekonfigurowania kosmosu, moralności i techniki w warunkach przesiedlenia

SŁOWA KLUCZE: kosmotechnika, opowiadanie historii, kosmologia Azteków, migracja, archiwum

Cosmotechnics as Storytelling

Western discourse tends to treat technology as a single, universal domain of tools, instruments, machines and information systems. As technological infrastructures become globalized, they erase local epistemologies and the ethical orders that render technical practices intelligible (Hui, 2020). This framing obscures the extent to which technics, understood as inscribed within an ecology of practices by which humans make, mediate, record and coordinate their modes of existence, are always embedded in specific world orders and moral orientations. This suggests there is not one, but many technologies, which together account for technodiversity. Developing this concept, Chinese philosopher of science Yuk Hui extends it to cosmotechnics to challenge ideas that reduce technology to homogenizing ‘monologics’. In Hui’s words, cosmotechnics may be understood as “the unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or art-making” (Hui, 2017, 6), advancing the culturally situated integration of technical practice, moral obligation, and cosmic order. Technodiversity turns to ‘multilogics,’ where multiple technical lineages and their world-making potentials works against the grain of the homogenizing pressures of global capitalism and its political effects. Here, pluralism resonates with the challenge of anthropology to the assumed universality of modern nature/culture divisions. French anthropologist Phillippe Descola argues that different societies distribute similarity and difference between humans and non-humans through distinct ‘modes of identification,’ and that modern naturalism is only one configuration among others (Descola, 2013). How these distinct modes of identification rely on the technics of storytelling is at the center of this article.

Storytelling and narrative, including speech, performance, fabulation, and different modalities of ‘writing’ and inscription, may be considered as more than mere symbolic expressions of culture. They are also practices embedded within technical systems with worlding capacity. Under conditions of movement, be it through migration, pilgrimage or nomadic thinking, storytelling narratives function as portable devices within technical systems across diverse spacetimes. They produce, store and transmit knowledge and memory, stabilizing a people’s orientation to place and time, giving directives for collective action and for intergenerational meaning- and sense-making. They collect and reproduce ways of being and other modes of existence beyond the confines of

official state archives, which as in the case of many colonized Indigenous histories, are incomplete or conveniently absent, and thus, perpetually unarchivable (Hartman, 2008).

Such is the case of the destroyed and forever lost codices, the only ‘written’ archives of pre-Columbian and pre-invasion Mesoamerican peoples, including importantly the Aztec, or Mexica culture. In this context, an Aztec cosmotechnics is activated by the encounter of the remarkably scant evidence of pre-invasion ‘inscribed’ historical archival records, the production of conquest and colonial ‘hybrids,’ modern origin myths of a glorious Indigenous past, collective memory, and the living culture of Nahua people today. Not reduceable to an ‘ethnic minority’ confined within a single, defined geographical location, more than 2,8 million Nahuas are spread across large territorial expanses and contexts in Mexico, Central America and the United States. They are a part of much broader populations of Indigenous migrants (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2005; Velasco Ortiz, 2014). Their realities make the recognition of a cosmotechnics that includes the Aztec and Mesoamerican worlds, not only relevant but present and factual.

Mesoamerican ‘writing’ has never been reducible to alphabetic script. Painted manuscripts were produced by trained *tlacuiloqueh* (scribes, painters) dedicated experts in graphic conventions that coordinated territorial ordering and movements in spacetime (triggering calendrical, astronomical and geographic knowledge), traced complex genealogies, registered tribute and produce, recorded and described rituals, etc. (Boone, 2000).

These *amoxtli* did, and continue to do, much more than to depict a world. They operationalize it. Their layouts and sign-systems function as interfaces that activate oral performance and memory, enabling repeatable narration, verification and decision-making (Boone & Mignolo, 1994). These glyphic notations and performative genres gave birth to hybrid colonial forms that extended their function beyond myth. They contained Indigenous knowledges and epistemic practices that were systematic, communal, and oriented toward shared coordination in complex environments, not only relevant in their circumscribed historical context, but throughout time. Thus, they are also records of scientific, historically dynamic, and generative knowledge. They contain scientific and technological understandings of Aztec and Nahua worlds, past, present and future, that are replicated through practices of communication, environmental engagement and inscription across pre-invasion, colonial and contemporary periods (McDonough, 2024). In Nahuatl terms, *amoxtli* (painted books or codices) and the work of *tlacuiloqueh* materialize a cosmotechnical relation: they organize memory as a practiced obligation to place, to ancestors and to future generations.

In the few surviving pre-invasion and early colonial *amoxtli*, many of which are contained in European and North American archives, it becomes visible, and literally ‘legible,’ how narrative technics were institutionalized in

pictorial inscription. For Nahua pasts, the colonial destruction, confiscation, and re-framing of painted books and ritual knowledge produced a paradox: what remains is precious precisely because it survives as fragment and translation, while what is missing continues to structure the limits of historical narration. In such conditions, storytelling becomes an archival technology that is also portable, repeatable, and capable of re-suturing what conquest sought to sever. Narrative circulates through speech, song, and reenactment in movement, and also, through ‘writing otherwise.’

The question is not whether stories are accurate according to colonial evidentiary regimes, but how they sustain relations when documentary continuity has been interrupted. Seen this way, Nahua storytelling is cosmotechnical: it binds together territories, temporal cycles, and moral demands by means of form through repetition, parallelism, layered time, and the return of place-names. To theorize Nahua narration as technics is to insist that the archive is political, and that counter-archival practices, including re-narration, re-inscription, and the strategic use of hybrid modalities, are modes of intellectual and territorial survival in movement. In a world of routes and forced mobilities (Clifford, 1997), narrative can re-anchor movement in obligation to place and to those who travel with and after us.

The narrative short story that follows is a circular movement through temporalities and territories, resisting linear histories of progress that naturalize extraction and homogenization. It foregrounds return, recurrence, and transformation as conditions of persistence. Based on the ‘reading’ of several codices, particularly the *Codex Boturini* (Fordham University, n.d.) this short narrative approaches the migration routes taken by several Nahua peoples, among them the Aztec, as an itinerary in which places are connected by walking and punctuated by ritual and everyday scenes. Its institutional description frames it as a record of the ‘pilgrimage’ from the mythical Aztlán, the place of herons (today believed to be located in the state of Utah), toward Anáhuac, the promised land next to water, as the site for the foundation of the Great Tenochtitlán (today Mexico City and the Basin of Mexico). As a narrative technology, the itinerary and the story stabilize a logic of movement by making routes and stopping places repeatably legible for collective recounting. It stores not only events but structures them along a journey in spacetime.

The story does not end in collapse and death, the preferred technique of conquest and colonization, but uses the afterlife of *amoxтли* literacy as an arc of technical mediation. The calendrical headings mark a technical-moral order in which time is counted and reiterated (*tlapohualli*) through storytelling as a wayfinding technology that binds terrestrial and cosmic cues, names places through environmental signs, while externalizing memory in transportable formats that travel well. In this sense, the codex is not only an archive of migration. It is a technology of migration, an interface for worlding in movement.

Instead of an ending, the story reframes contemporary Nahua mobility into the United States, where border infrastructures not only arrest movement, but also act like a gigantic archive. They classify persons and movements through documents, surveillance, capture, detention and deportation. Against this regime of control, storytelling persists as counter-technics of surviving manuscripts and new recoveries. The mythical Aztlán is reactivated in modern political imagination in Chicano movements that invoke Aztec cosmologies and technics to articulate claims of belonging and identity. While not identical to Nahua cosmology, this imagination illustrates a general mechanism, where mythic geographies become technologies of worlding under displacement by organizing memory, legitimacy and shared identities. Narratives can function as counter-technics within this landscape. For Nahua and other Indigenous migrants, storytelling operates as a technique for maintaining community across movement, negotiating authority and sustaining ethical relations to place. It is through storytelling that they become technical and historical agents. They embody *amoxтли* literacy not as a vanished craft but as latent cosmotechnics: a reservoir of methods for re-linking cosmos, morality, and technical practice in the present. The reader is welcome to join the journey that here commences.

Ce técpatl (one flint): geographic a priori (1111 CE)

The mountains and the ravines that cut their flesh into deep canyons expose the evisceration of the Earth to elements and geogenic processes that render place and time irrelevant. Erosion, sedimentation, eruptions, pressure: unwitnessed reconfigurations give birth to deserts and oceans of sand and rock. Together with saguaros, owls, coyotes and rattlesnakes, these earth-beings reticulate the natural world into cosmological structuration. They precede your own genesis by eons, and the genesis of the objects, both technical and religious, that mediate existence between you, the cosmos and the world. They are the *what* that defines the *who*.

Who are you? You are part of one of seven nomadic Chichimec tribes traversing the western flank of what today is the Sonoran Desert. Your tribe emerges from the place of the seven caves, Chicomóztoc. Your people call themselves Aztec: those who depart from the place of herons, Aztlán, a mythical place surrounded by water and birds that defines your genesis and outlines your feathered destiny. Neither you nor anyone in your caravan remembers these places. Time, perhaps desertification, cold, the disappearance of animals you once hunted or invasions by more bellicose others have effaced them. All you know is that like your ancestors, they lie behind you.

It is a hot day. The sun casting the shadows of those walking ahead of you into an interminable serpent of dark sand. It is the year one flint, *ce técpatl*, the spatio-temporal beginning of the universe and a reference to the sacred flint

expelled from heaven in Chicomóztoc. This artifact resurfaces from cosmogonic origins, produces fire and becomes the knife that extracts human hearts. It is the perfect object whose functions remain inexhaustible, from which countless other objects, from calendars to weapons, will take technical form. Behind you, a group of elders you call *teomamaque*, the carriers of gods, transports sacred bundles, *tlaquimilolli*, containing the objects that hold meaning for your tribe. A stone disk bears data offered by a pantheon headed by the rising eagle deity Tonatiuh; antlers and shells invoke the magical powers of the universe of which you are part; clay idols receive prayers for good auspice; and the humanly remains of your war god Huitzilopochtli lie wrapped tightly in cotton cloth, secured by two maguey-cactus spines. You walk facing the rising sun and following the morning star. You stop only occasionally to erect temples and make offerings to Huitzilopochtli when the wayfinding cues that he revealed eternities ago become indiscernible. You name these places by the signs they bear: a meandering river, a mountain, a cave inhabited by bats, a plane crawling with shiny insects, a barren field covered in thistles, or a dark forest inhabited by gigantic trees. But you do not settle there; you leave your architectures behind and continue walking.

At night you follow the path indicated by the Tianquiztli, the group of stars that bearded others in togas refer to as the Pleiades, until earthly signs revealed to you in dreams begin to become legible again. You keep walking. You are of the landscape, and like your universe, you are made of movement: *ollin*. For more than two centuries your people advance along a chain of hardships toward an uncertain, yet announced, destination. Your path is itinerant, a wayfinding journey threaded by terrestrial and celestial events toward a place that is as real and as mythical as your point of origin. The territory you traverse, and that traverses you, is not merely a map; it is the cosmology that gives rise to the movement of a migrant people.

You do not know it, but on the other side of the ocean, which will later be called the Atlantic, a different calendar marks the year 1111. While you walk toward the unknown, others bearing a red cross on their chests embark on pilgrimages of their own, attempting to secure lands they deem holy and promised. This is not simple synchronism. Like you, they too remain unaware that their march forms part of a powerful mechanism driven by complex desires that soon will force, and simultaneously foreclose, the possibilities of a common world.

Nahui acatl (four reed): transduction (1220 CE)

The world suddenly intensifies as you find yourself standing at the edge of an enormous lake surrounded by saline wetlands, flanked by smoking mountains whose ice-glazed peaks shimmer in the moonlight. Movement arrests.

A grounding occurs. A figure is uprooted. Huitzilopochtli has guided you from a distance, directing your movement from Aztlán, the place of herons, toward the land next to water, Anáhuac. You recognize the signs. Before you, a space-time that matches the navel of the moon materializes in the encounter of earth and water. At sunrise, in a clearing of reeds rustling in the marshes, the imperceptible beating of iridescent wings appears as a hummingbird. It remains immobile, vibrating in the air. You know it is more than a bird. It is the reincarnation of a dead warrior, a singularity that signals a legion, a multiplicity of warriors slaughtered in battle. The hummingbird is also the embodiment of your war god Huitzilopochtli, whose headpiece is adorned with exquisite turquoise feathers. Through a series of transmutations and metamorphosis, the hummingbird god transforms your tribe into a people, the mighty Mexica. Next to you, a one-year-old boy as small as the hummingbird plays with a wart-covered albino toad on the muddy shore. The boy has no name yet.

You and your people are not alone in this strange, humid environment. Other Chichimec peoples, all Nahua, have arrived in the region in migratory waves over the last few centuries. You share not only a genetic code but also the Yutonahua language. You can communicate. You learn how they have developed a mode of amphibian existence on the lake based on a highly productive hydroponic agricultural system of floating gardens called *chinampa*.

For your people, however, the lake and its marshland remain unapproachable. Scarcity of food and fresh water makes you vulnerable and your existence is precarious. You settle in Chapultepec, the hill of crickets, an uninhabited headland to the west of the lake, with caves and hidden springs of fresh water. Over the next decades your rulers will construct a palace surrounded by gardens and a *totocalli*, an animal house inhabited by countless endemic and foreign species brought from all corners of Cemanáhuac, later called Mesoamerica: birds, reptiles, mammals and fish tended by a cohort of dedicated specialists.

The hostilities to secure your survival continue until, as the prophecies foretell, Huitzilopochtli intervenes. He seizes a prisoner and extracts his heart with a sacred flint knife, *técpatl*, projecting it with force into the lake. The still-beating heart lands on a boulder protruding from a sandbank in the middle of the great water. The boy with the albino toad receives his name: Tenoch, stone prickly pear, the symbol of a heart. In awe you witness how, from the encounter of lithic and organic, rock and beating human heart, the heart of Tenoch, a gigantic nopal cactus rises into the sky. It becomes the habitat of *cuaubtli*, the royal eagle, spirit animal of Huitzilopochtli. A rattlesnake writhes in the eagle's beak. This natural apparition will soon be transformed into the life of the most powerful confederation of territorial and political alliances of pre-invasion Mesoamerica, dominated by the Mexica empire: your own.

Across the ocean, the year 1300 runs its course. The Crusades have ended. New calendars, new cartographies and new spatial imaginaries are taking shape.

These developments will not favor you. A vague recollection of dreams and images of past and future, like feathers on a serpent, manifest in dreams as omens. You feel the strong urge to express and record them. You find a feather on the ground. Nearby you collect a *tecozahuatl* stone, grind it, and mix its powder into brilliant ochre pigment, with which you encase the glyph of four movement onto the corner of your loincloth.

Ome calli (two house): Tenochtitlan (1325 CE)

In the middle of the lake, on the boulder that holds the beating heart of Tenoch, which feeds the nopal with human blood and serves as home to the eagle devouring the rattlesnake, a powerful material and symbolic assemblage is activated. What makes this assemblage singular is the presence of a human heart at its core; a desiring organ without without reason or memory, but without which, life is impossible. Your existence is driven by the circulatory and systemic capacity of the heart to move blood and sustain life. You offer it as a token for the desires of cosmic forces and godly appetite. A heart's vitality that fuels transformative operations and sustains a mode of existence on terrestrial and extra-terrestrial planes, and that binds them to your human condition, always contingent and fragile. You recognize that this is not a serendipitous natural event but an act of embodiment that signals the moment when place and time solidify, when figure and ground become unhinged, when your people and the world split into two aspects of one reality: *altépetl*, water-mountain. Your tribe attains the social standing of community and the political status of place-people. The assemblage briefly concentrates a technicity that, in only a few generations, will reticulate the natural and human worlds into social and spatial organizations spanning thousands of kilometers, establishing dense networks of commerce routes, militarized and patrolled by armies of warriors. It will also underpin the erection of the Great Tenochtitlan, capital city of Mexica civilization.

Tenoch, the boy with the white toad, becomes a grown man, a *huey tlatoani*, chief speaker, and your ruler. Your people are Mexica-Tenochca, hegemon of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan. Together they form a cosmopolitics based on a careful tuning of divine forces, religious ceremonies, political and economic organization, and eco-environmental sensibilities, all mediated by technical activity and a shared aesthetic expression.

White others develop their own technicities and expel their religious enemies from shrinking territories across the ocean. Their hunger for power and resources drives an engine of discovery and innovation that crystallizes into an imperial war machine of global conquest and colonization. A drive toward universality and reliance on geometrical rationality detaches from older European

ethnographic imaginaries. Urgency thickens the air. Calendars, movement and geographies everywhere intensify, including your own.

Ce acatl (one reed): transduction (1519 CE)

Your calendars register this intensity with incessant movements: *tlapobualli*, to count, to reiterate, to repeat operations. Time and space do not appear as irreversible or linear. They are reckoned through cyclical transformations according to recurrent moments of creation and destruction of the Earth. Human migrations are preceded and followed by many other forms of movement, from the social to the seismic, reminding you of the cosmogonic moment your people traverse: *nabui ollin*, four movement, the fifth sun in the creation and recreation of the Earth, when the world will end in a great earthquake, when the fine tuning of geogenic forces and celestial reconfigurations becomes critical for the continuation of human life on Earth.

Your world, the world of the fifth sun, foretells that apocalypse lies both behind and ahead of you. This knowledge triggers a specific cosmopolitics grounded in practices that avert endings and support continuity. It also defines a material preference for stone in the making of durable, expressive technical and religious objects. Metals such as bronze, copper, silver and gold arouse greed and bend, erode or melt in the fiery end of times. A specific form of cosmotechnics based on lithic intelligence sustains the rapid branching of technological trajectories and technical tendencies that converge in the diversified disciplinary knowledge needed to erect the physical forms of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, an amphibian city that, over the next two centuries, will become one of the largest and most densely inhabited cities on the planet. This knowledge materializes in engineering technologies applied to agricultural production and infrastructural works such as dikes, sluices, potable water supply and waste management systems, all crucial for balancing human activity with environmental forces and local ecosystems.

While one group of your people develops the technologies to erect the city, you learn other techniques. You enter the *calmécac*, or school, and become a *tlacuilo*, a writer in painting, learning *tlacuilobua*, the complex techniques of Mexica pictographic writing in *amoxtli*, or codex books. In them you document and explain all aspects of your world. You participate in interethnic and intergenerational collaborations to produce transportable codices composed of images that sit at a juncture between the sensible world and the Nahuatl language. Graphic, pictorial, phonetic and sonic signs converge in a world of signification where content and expression remain united. As a *tlacuilo*, you help externalize memory from the purely organic into technics that set conditions for the organization of technical milieus thereafter. You participate in

practices that narrate the formation of organizational technics: writing, pottery, sculpture, mural painting, basket and textile weaving, the making of tools and machines and the design of technologies for heavy masonry temples and other architectural structures firmly emplaced yet floating upon a watery landscape. You become exteriorized memory: a techno-environmental storyteller, weaver of earthly and cosmic entanglements mediated by technical objects and practices that shape your fragile cosmos in continuous transition.

White others have arrived, mounted on beasts with foaming snouts and nervous eyes, they bear weapons that spit a deadly fire. They are forming alliances with your neighbors and detractors, and soon they will materialize your omens and premonitions.

Eyi calli (three house): collapse (1521 CE)

It is a rainy night on 13 August 1521. Tenochtitlan is engulfed in flames. Its temples lie in ruins. Your people are enslaved. A chaotic clash of forces alters your mode of existence. With a few others you manage to escape the burning city in canoes under the cover of darkness. You return to Chapultepec, the hill of grasshoppers, where you first settled two hundred years ago. In the *totocalli* the animals and their caretakers, wince and howl as their enclosures and flesh are devoured by fire. With trepidation you enter one of the caves on the flanks of the hill. On your back you carry a heavy *tlaquimilolli* bundle containing a thick codex in deerskin and *amatl* paper on which you have been working, thinking in sadness of the hundreds of volumes left behind to be consumed by fire and by the ire of white conquerors. You stumble in the darkness of the cave and walk for centuries in deafening silence. You traverse Mictlán, the place of the dead, until you find your way out of the cave.

Mahtlactli huan ome técpatl (twelve flint): return (2024 CE)

You walk across what today is the Sonoran Desert, along the path your ancestors once followed but now in reverse, heading north, back where you came from. Beside you an interminable serpent of dark sand is reshaped by the feet of thousands of your people, migrant caravans originating in the south, searching for a way back to Aztlán and the great Chichimeca Nation to begin anew (León-Portilla, 2005). You wait for nightfall to climb over a gigantic, immobile steel serpent wrapped in barbed wire that meanders thousands of miles along an artificial division line. Its poison is a necrotic bordering technology designed to catch and paralyze all who attempt to cross it. You evade the sirens, headlamps and bullets of people dressed in black trying to stop you. A long, dark night

breaks with dawn. You stand in the American Intermountain West, your feet are not bare anymore, yet they ache as never before. Asphalt and concrete have replaced the softness of sand. You belong to a people that others pejoratively call Chicano. Tenochtitlan is no longer the only city in flames; the entire world seems to be burning up. A new fire, cold and blue, lights up the smooth surfaces of screens everywhere. Its power threatens to consume the whole Earth. Another end of days is announced by different means. Omens and dreams have turned into nightmares.

It is the spring of 2024. You have been working since sunrise in the kitchen of a dinner in Salt Lake City. Just before noon you take your break next to the garbage containers in the back alley. You light a cigarette and pull out the newspaper you bought on your way to work. A headline in bold catches your attention: “New Aztec codices discovered: the codices of San Andrés Tetepilco” (INAH, 2024). The article claims that this codex might hold the secrets of the ‘ghosts of history’, your people. You feel the Heart of Tenoch beating inside your chest. Somehow, you know that the time has come. In the article the codex is treated with a different sensibility. It promises that the surviving *amoxtli* will be read and deciphered in Nahuatl by twenty-first-century *tlacuiloqueh*, who apply a logic that sharpens the articulation between nature, culture and technology, instead of insisting on their separation. You learn that, aided by digital technologies and practices of ‘archiving otherwise,’ the codices are beginning to be approached not as mere historical evidence of a vanished people, not only as record of the destruction of their lifeways, or as the exotic aesthetic expression of some extinct ‘ecological Indian’ (Krech, 1999) but as living instruments that embody different forms of participation between humans, nonhumans and technology that sidestep the traps of a deadly planetary technological system that forecloses ontological multiplicity and with it the possibility of worlds where spacetime is a feathered serpent in motion. A world you have walked on many times before in search of other worlds, profound and real.

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