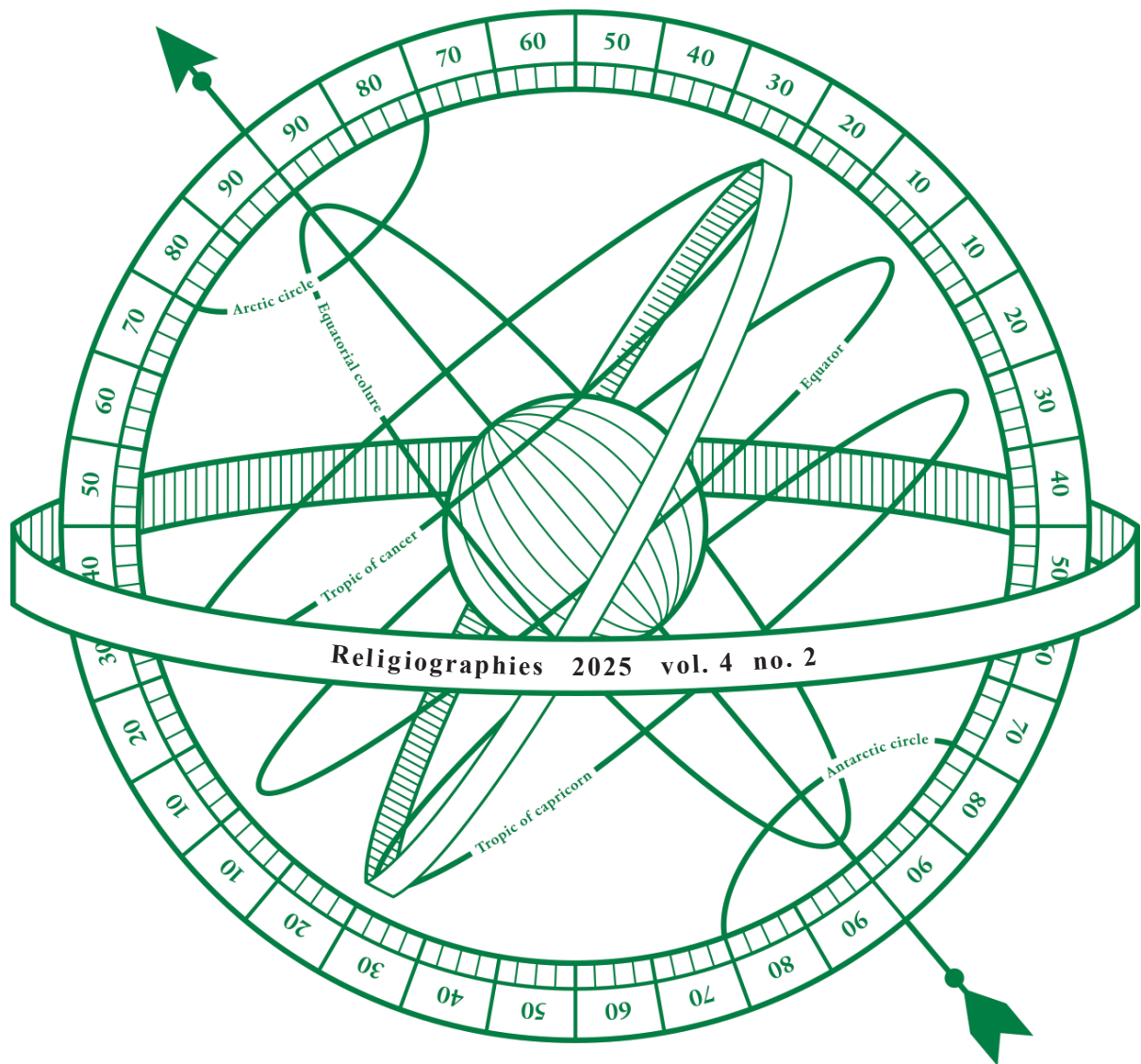


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue  
“Occultural Transfers between North and South”  
edited by  
Giuliano D’Amico

# Heterography

## Conversations on Mexican Art

MARIANO VILLALBA and  
EFRAÍN BECERRA CASTAÑEDA

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Efraín Becerra Castañeda is a Mexican visual artist of Nahuatl-Totonac heritage, born in Cuetzalan, Mexico. His artistic practice is deeply rooted in both the ancestral traditions of Mesoamerica and the classical techniques of Western art. His work reflects a profound engagement with, and understanding of, the cosmology of ancient Mexican cultures, while exploring their continued resonance in contemporary cultural, social, and ecological contexts.

Becerra's work moves fluidly between philosophy, visual art, and Mesoamerican cosmologies. Through his paintings, he reclaims the worldviews of his ancestors, giving visual form to a conception of life rooted in cyclical time and in the deep interconnection between body, nature, and cosmos. At the same time, he integrates the methods and disciplines of Western art without compromising the autonomy of his own cultural perspective.

I interviewed Efraín because his work offers not only aesthetic depth but also ontological significance. His voice represents a living continuity of Indigenous cosmologies and thought, articulated not from an external or academic viewpoint, but from within the traditions themselves. In a time of growing interest in decolonial aesthetics, Indigenous sovereignty, and the revaluation of native epistemologies, Efraín's perspective is particularly valuable. His reflections illuminate not only the visual dimensions of cultural memory and identity but also the potential of art to serve as a space of encounter—where diverse conceptions of time, nature, the sacred, and the human can enter into meaningful dialogue.

His practice invites us to reconsider the role of the artist not merely as a creator, but as a cultural translator—mediating between worlds and reclaiming ancestral knowledge within a contemporary context. For these reasons, I believe his work speaks directly to the core concerns of *Religiographies* and contributes meaningfully to the broader effort to expand the horizons of religious, philosophical, and aesthetic inquiry—both at the margins and beyond the boundaries of the Western canon.

1) You studied painting with a disciple of Gerardo Murillo, also known as “Dr. Atl,” who is considered the “father of Mexican muralism” and a key figure in the Mexican school of painting. This movement is known for its focus on monumental art, the exaltation of Indigenous cultures, and the representation of the Mexican people. How has this training influenced your artistic vision and the way you approach themes in your work?

Mexican culture owes much to Dr. Atl. He was an exceptionally sharp-minded man, admired and respected, though he also had his share of adversaries during his time. One of his most ambitious projects was the creation of a city of painters, which he planned to call *Olinca*, a Nahuatl term meaning “place in motion.” Unfortunately, he passed away before he could bring this vision to life. His own name, *Atl*, which means “water” in Nahuatl, reflects the fluid and dynamic nature that characterized both his life and his work.

I had the opportunity to study his artistic production closely, even holding some of his original drawings in my hands. These included landscapes, two intriguing self-portraits that he had once gifted and dedicated to his partners, as well as four remarkable self-portraits from the time when he owned the Parícutín volcano in Michoacán. These works, created using *acuarresina*—a technique he pioneered—reveal his profound understanding of both volcanology and astronomy. His paintings from this period stand out for their striking use of color and modern composition, influenced by *Art Nouveau*, which itself drew from the aesthetics of Japanese woodblock prints.

Beyond his artistic legacy, Dr. Atl was a crucial promoter of culture in Mexico. Together with José Vasconcelos, he laid the foundations for what we now recognize as Mexican muralism. While Atl encouraged artistic production, Vasconcelos propagated the concept of the “cosmic race” (*raza cósmica*), a reinterpretation of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, which was highly influential at the time. This idea celebrated mestizaje as a spiritual crucible, blending the pre-Hispanic heritage with the Christian tradition of the West—particularly the legacies of the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon empires—to construct a uniquely Mexican identity, in contrast to the European model previously promoted under Porfirio Díaz's regime.



Fig. 1. *Anawak*, Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 30 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 2. *El ciclo de los jaguares* (The Cycle of the Jaguars), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 60 x 40 cm, 2022.

2) Your work explores both pre-Hispanic cosmologies and the colonial period, where Indigenous cultures and Christianity intertwine. What challenges do you face in visually representing these two eras, and how do your pieces reflect the conflicts, encounters, and syncretisms between them?

Being born into an Indigenous community is not enough; it is also essential to have mentors who teach us to value ourselves. In my case, figures such as Dr. Atl, my teacher Ángel D. Márquez, my parents, and my grandparents have been, and will continue to be, the most important influences in my life. Culture shapes our purpose as human beings in the face of life's challenges, but it is the way we define what it means to be human that determines the path we take.

In the Náhuatl language, the concept of “human” is expressed with the word *tlakatl*, which means “half” or “part of.” This notion suggests that human beings are like seeds: with proper cultivation, they can flourish and fully develop their potential. In this worldview, life is not conceived as a right granted by divine grace but as something that must be earned. An example of this is the ritual in which a child, upon eating their first bite of maize, became indebted to those who had made that sustenance possible. This act was called *masehualistli*, which can be translated as “precious merit,” meaning the beauty of achieving dignity through experience and effort.

In Latin America, social structures have traditionally been centered around the family, and Mexico is no exception. Its cultural foundation lies in the social organization around maize, which remained central even after the arrival of Christianity and the integration of Catholic festivals. Despite the process of syncretism, many of these celebrations still revolve around maize and its cycles, reflected in the role of the *mayordomos*, the successors of the ancient priests. These traditions have left their mark not only on ritual practices but also in codices, ancient astronomical centers, and various studies that continue to inspire my work.

Without understanding the relationship between maize, astronomy, and humanity, it is impossible to grasp the pre-Hispanic worldview. For these civilizations, hunger was a god that taught the discipline of labor. The achievement of transforming the *teocintle* plant into maize is a testament to the sophisticated social organization and profound environmental knowledge that these cultures possessed. My pictorial work revolves around this idea: organization as a fundamental necessity for any human group and the study of how my ancestors managed to structure their societies.

Above all, my work seeks to honor and respect my people. Indigenous communities were not simply “noble savages”; they were human beings with a profound capacity for observation and awareness. They constructed their worldview by asking fundamental questions about origin and existence. Their legacy is not only found in mythology and rituals but also in their architecture, astronomical observatories, calendars, and the vast body of knowledge they developed to understand the world around them.



Fig. 3. *El juego de los ciclos* (The Game of Cycles), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.



Fig. 4. *Ensueño de México* (Dream of Mexico), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 100 x 150 cm, 2024.

3) You use ancestral techniques to craft your own canvases, a practice that connects to the pre-Hispanic period. How do you integrate these traditional methods with Western pictorial techniques? What do you seek to achieve through this fusion of eras and techniques?

I studied in an *atelier* specializing in ancient techniques, following the tradition of the old European schools, where all students were initiated into these practices under strict rules. Among them was the confidentiality of material processes and the commitment not to compete with the master within his own workshop. Taking on this responsibility granted me access to technical knowledge that, to this day, helps me find the most suitable ways to express both my ideas and emotions.

One of my preferred techniques is working with *amate* paper, a traditional Mesoamerican support made from the bark of the tree of the same name. I also use high-quality natural pigments, such as cochineal red and Maya blue, both of which have exceptional properties. Additionally, I have learned to create my own colors, allowing me greater control over the materiality of my works. At the same time, I make use of a variety of industrial pigments available in the art market. I believe that traditional artisanal techniques are not in conflict with contemporary materials; rather, the key lies in selecting the best from both worlds.

Through my work, I aim to promote the value of tradition and establish a bridge between the past and the present, adapting ancient techniques to contemporary expressive needs without losing their essence.



Fig. 5. *Masewalistli* (Indigenous Identity), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 60 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 6. *Quetzalcóatl* (Feathered Serpent), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2018.

4) How does your personal history and your Nahuatl-Totonac heritage influence your choice of themes and the way you represent them visually?

My childhood was spent between Cuetzalan, in the Nahuatl region, and Caxhuacan, in the Totonac region, both located in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Growing up in these places allowed me to engage directly with traditional festivities, which, on the surface, revolve around Catholic saints. However, it is essential to understand that maize is the central axis of these celebrations. Without maize, the concept of the gods, as well as the relationship between the body, space, and time, become incomprehensible. In these communities, visible elements and those that can only be perceived through intuition come together in their customs and traditions.

One of the main reasons I sought to reconnect with these childhood experiences was the impact of moving to the city of Puebla at the age of seven. There, I became acutely aware of the stigma surrounding Indigenous peoples; at one point, I even internalized that prejudice and went through a period of self-rejection. However, over time, I realized that cultural power is stronger than any ideology. From that moment on, I began to seek a sense of order in my life—to learn how to balance diversity with unity, and unity within diversity.

In this process, painting and interacting with people from different cultural traditions helped me develop a deeper sense of observation. After all, Mexico, as a nation, is in a constant search to explain its identity, its roots, and its potential, aiming to channel them in ways that allow it to flourish as a people. In this regard, food has historically been a defining cultural marker: it is often said that if you eat tortillas, beans, and chili, then you inherently share an understanding of what it means to be Mexican. In the past, a people's identity was closely tied to its agricultural products, and sharing them with neighboring communities was one of the primary ways of forging relationships. The richness of Mexican gastronomy and the structure of the *milpa*—the traditional system of cultivating maize, chili, beans, and squash—reflect this perspective. It is no coincidence that the Day of the Dead celebrations embody this same logic: even the deceased symbolically return to partake in a shared meal with the living.



Fig. 7. *Tonalpowki* (The Timekeeper), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2023.

5) Maize and death are central themes in pre-Hispanic worldviews, which you frequently explore in your work. What role do these elements play, and what meanings do you seek to convey through them in the context of contemporary culture?

Both maize and death remain central themes in Mexican culture. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, these elements were not merely symbolic but essential to the survival and structure of society. However, it is crucial to recognize that the political organization of the Americas—marked by a vertical territorial axis—functioned differently from Eurasia, where a horizontal layout facilitated interconnectedness and imperial expansion. While in the Old World the wheel was not invented for leisure but became a key tool for transporting war tributes and spoils, in Mesoamerica—although knowledge of the wheel already existed, as evidenced by various wheeled anthropomorphic toys—it was not used for transportation due to the absence of draft animals such as horses, cows, or donkeys and the region’s irregular topography. In this context, survival depended on direct adaptation to the natural environment.

In this vertical territory, maize production was a collective concern. If an Aztec lacked maize, it was likely that a Maya did as well, since climatic conditions affected the entire region. There was no nearby neighbor to turn to for assistance or to invade for resources, as was often the case in Eurasia. For this reason, Mesoamerican civilizations developed an exceptionally precise understanding of the agricultural calendar, which dictated their festivals and ensured the synchronization of their crops with natural cycles. Before contemplating philosophical questions about the purpose of existence, these societies first had to answer the fundamental question: “What will we eat today?” According to the *Popol Vuh*, human beings were created from maize, reinforcing its role as a symbol of humanity itself. Since maize cannot grow without human intervention, their relationship is one of interdependence: man is born as a seed, and without proper cultivation, he cannot realize his full potential.

Death, in turn, has been a central element in all cultures, but within the Náhuatl tradition, it takes on a particular meaning. Existence was perceived as a dream of the senses, where the difference between dying and sleeping lay in waking up to another reality—what we would call a new perception of existence. For the ancient Mexicans, the only dignified way to live was by cultivating a strong heart (inwardly) and a true face (a heroic attitude toward life).

I recall a master from Cholula who used to say: “Hunger is a great teacher. It teaches us to value effort and to understand suffering as part of the process of blossoming.” In this sense, human beings can adapt to almost anything—except the absence of food and sleep. Sustenance, in one form or another, is a constant necessity of life. A Náhuatl proverb expresses this with great clarity: “Whoever is born, is born with death.”

This principle is also reflected in Náhuatl poetry, where the flower—daughter of the earth and the sun—symbolizes truth and the fleeting nature of existence. A poem attributed to Tochiuitzin conveys this idea:

### ***Zan Tontemiquico***

*Zan tocochitlehuaco  
zan tontemiquico  
Ah nelli, ah nelli,  
Tinemico in Tlaltipac.  
Xoxopan xihuitl ipan  
Tochihuacan.  
On cuetlahuia.  
Xochitl in tonacayo  
Zan tontemiquico.*

### ***We Came Only to Dream***

*Suddenly, we emerge from a dream,  
we came only to dream.  
It is not true, it is not true  
that we came to live on earth.  
Like spring grass  
our being flourishes,  
then it withers.  
Flowers sprout from our flesh,  
we came only to dream.*

Death, as a cultural concept, is a matter of meaning and symbolism. The ability to symbolize is what distinguishes human beings from other species, which is why it is crucial to overcome the fear and taboo associated with it. In Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, the myth of Adam and Eve tells how, upon eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, the first humans became aware of their own mortality—of their cultural condition as finite beings. A similar narrative exists in Mesoamerican mythology, particularly in the story of Quetzalcóatl. According to this tale, Tezcatlipoca shows Quetzalcóatl an obsidian mirror and tells him *Ximiximati* (“Know yourself”). At that moment, Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl becomes aware of his own mortality.

This myth suggests that the awareness of death (powerlessness) is what drives the pursuit of freedom (power). Following this revelation, Quetzalcóatl embarks on a journey to *Tlillan-Tlapallan* (“the place of red and black”), a *difrasismo*—a dual metaphor—representing knowledge. The image of Quetzalcóatl in death signifies the cognitive objectification of mortality: the deified king of Tula, embodying humanity, realizes for the first time his inescapable fate. When the ancient Nahuas sang and danced to this myth during their festivals, they experienced a form of *co-birth* into their mortal condition.

In Náhuatl, the word for *death* (*mikiliztli*) is linked to words such as *tlanamikiliztli* (“thought”), *tlalnamiqui* (“to remember” or “to think deeply”), *temiksoch* (“lucid dream”), and *temikmati* (“controlled or intentional dream”). This linguistic connection reveals an association between death, thought, and consciousness.

For these reasons, the Day of the Dead is a central theme in my work. Perhaps it is because I was born amidst the scent of *copal* and *cempasúchil*, surrounded by the celebrations of this festival. It is a tradition so deeply rooted that nearly every Indigenous community in Mexico has its own name for it: *Micailhuitl*, *Xantolo*, *Xandu*, *Viko Ndi*, *Janal Pixan*, among others. Its meaning goes beyond folklore; it is a reaffirmation of life’s continuity and of the memory of those who came before us. As an ancient text from the *Florentine Codex* states:

*Will there truly be no death?  
Where will we really go?  
For death is our tribute...  
It has claimed us all,  
we have offered it here on earth.  
For this is what our ancestors said:  
... when we die,  
... it is not true that we die,  
... for we still live...  
we exist, for we are reborn...  
we awaken.*



Fig. 8. *Weyna* (The Grandmother), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.

6) What is one key difference between the Western and Indigenous Mexican worldviews that could help foster respect for cultural diversity?

Writing and language emerged as techniques of communication, whose moral use depends on the culture that employs them. Thanks to the written records of chroniclers, we can study how these friars perceived the pre-Hispanic world and understand that each culture establishes a unique relationship with time and the environment.

In Western culture, the concept of time is a fundamental pillar. The notion of creation, derived from this temporal framework, justifies the existence of the Last Judgment and has profoundly shaped the Christian worldview. Within this framework, humanity seeks to restore a lost paradise—located in the past—by projecting it into the future through political and social models such as democracy, socialism, communism, liberalism, and neoliberalism. These ideologies do not arise in isolation but are the natural consequence of a linear perception of time, in which human history is often interpreted as the history of empires. Within this logic, peace is conceived as an order imposed by the dominant power of the moment—until another people replace it and establish their own system of order, which is also called “peace.”

In contrast, Mesoamerican peoples understood time as being intrinsically linked to natural cycles. Within their worldview, the idea of creation leading to a Final Judgment had no place; rather, the end of a cycle simply marked the beginning of another in a continuous and timeless process. In Mayan mythology, for example, the gods created humans so that they could name them, meaning that consciousness was born from the spoken word, reflecting the gods through human beings. According to this tradition, the Mayas’ sacred duty to their gods was to care for nature, as it was through nature that the gods would communicate with them. When asked about their understanding of the divine, the Mayas responded: “The gods are imprisoned within the cycles of the stars.” This perspective is reflected in their agricultural calendars, rituals, and astronomical centers—expressions of a cosmic dialogue that was also shared by other Indigenous peoples. Even today, these worldviews have been reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary life, coexisting with the syncretism inherited from our Novohispanic ancestors.

It is essential to recognize the respect that all worldviews and cosmogonies deserve, as they serve as mirrors that allow us to observe how different cultures have navigated their historical journeys through life. This diversity enriches us as a human species.

In the Nahua tradition, there is a fundamental concept: *neltiliztli*, which translates as “truth” or “rootedness.” For the ancient Nahuas, this term referred not only to a form of knowledge but to a way of life that was truly worth living. It was not about the mere accumulation of knowledge or the pursuit of individual ideals such as happiness, but rather about prioritizing the interrelation of the social group over the individual. Life was seen as a constant flow of change and challenges, and no matter how strong one might consider oneself, there was always the possibility of falling. In such moments, family and community were there to provide support and help overcome difficulties.

Similarly, Catholic tradition has developed the concept of the common good. However, the real challenge lies in its practical application, avoiding exclusionary ideas such as the notion of “chosen peoples” or “superior men,” which have historically been used to justify the subjugation of others and the perpetuation of inequality. These constructs, rooted in exclusion, only serve to create division and suffering within humanity. In this sense, art plays a crucial role: it can offer a vision that fosters mutual respect and understanding between cultures, helping to build bridges rather than barriers.

### **A few words about Mariano Villalba and Efraín Becerra Castañeda**

Mariano Villalba is a historian trained in cultural history and religious studies, with a focus on the intersections of politics and spirituality in Latin America. He earned a joint PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Lausanne and the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in Spirituality and the Arts at the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), Harvard Divinity School. His current project, *Occult Movements and Mexican Mural Art*, examines the influence of Theosophy and other esoteric currents on the development of Mexican muralism, with particular attention to Mexican female artists such as María Izquierdo, Cordelia Urueta, and Sofía Bassi. He recently curated a digital exhibit

on the topic, hosted at the CSWR's website. His forthcoming book, *Occult Mexico: The Imagination of Mexican Antiquity, from the Colonial Era to the Revolution*, will be published by Oxford University Press. Link to Villalba's profile: <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/people/mariano-villalba>  
Link to Digital Exhibit: [www.occultmexicanart.com](http://www.occultmexicanart.com)

Efraín Becerra Castañeda is a painter from Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico, professionally trained at the *Atelier Nova Escuela Poblana* in Puebla. His technical skill and artistic vision have established him as a notable figure in the tradition of *Traditional Mexican Realism*. Born into a family of Nahua-Totonac healers, Becerra grew up witnessing the practices of traditional medicine carried out by his grandparents—an experience that profoundly shaped the themes and spiritual depth of his work. His art is rooted in the legacy of the Mexican School and characterized by a distinctive *Costumbrista Surrealism*. Mastery of form, color, texture, and the symbolic use of imagery are consistent features in his paintings. Becerra has participated in numerous international exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and Japan, and has been involved in projects that promote cultural identity and respect for ancestral traditions as essential foundations of civilization.

Link to Becerra's website: [www.efrainbecerracastaneda.com](http://www.efrainbecerracastaneda.com)



Fig. 9. Efraín Becerra Castañeda.

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