The Mexicas walked out of their place of origin many years before they finally stepped into the Central Valley.1 During their long and winding peregrination, the people frequently begged their patron god Huitzilopochtli to settle, but he forced them to press on again and again. When the Mexicas finally arrived in the Central Valley, the Colhuas, an established polity, allowed them to live at Tizaapan, an area believed to be uninhabitable because of an epic scorpion and snake infestation. Against these odds, the Mexicas thrived in Tizaapan, a feat that launched their reputation as fierce and fearless. Seeing that his people were prepared—yet again—to settle permanently, Huitzilopochtli called his priests and officials. The following events took place near the end of their migration; seventeenth-century Nahua historian Chimalpahin dates it to “the year Thirteen Reed, 1323.”2

After gathering his senior officials, Huitzilopochtli asked them to travel to nearby Colhuacan and invite Achitometl, the local ruler, to send his daughter to Tizaapan. Huitzilopochtli told the priests, “oc ce tlacatl y neciz. ytoca yao-cihuatl. ca nocitzin.” (My fathers, another personage is to appear. Her name is Yaocihuatl; she is my grandmother. And we are to acquire her.)3 Diego Durán explains that Huitzilopochtli planned to marry her, and both sources attest that Huitzilopochtli wanted the young woman to become Yaocihuatl (Enemy Woman) and be venerated as Toci, Tonantzin (Our mother, our grandmother).4 She would motivate the Mexicas to leave Tizaapan and move on to founding their own city.

And so the priests went to Colhuacan and asked Achitometl for his daughter’s hand in marriage:

nopiltzitzine tlacatl tlahtohuanie. ca timitztotlatlauhtilia yn timo-colhuain y timomacehualhuan yhua yn ixquichtiin yn Mexica. ca tic-momacahuiliz ca titechmomaquiliz. yn mocozqui yn moquetzal yn mochpochtzin yn toxhuiuhtzin yn cihuapilli ca ompa motlapiellitiez. y noncan yn tepetitlan ticaapan.
THE FATE OF EARTHLY THINGS

(My nobleman, lord, ruler, we beg you, we who are your grandfathers, we who are your subjects, and all the Mexica, to concede, to give us your necklace, your precious quetzal feather, your daughter, the noblewoman our granddaughter. She will be watched over there among the mountains in [Tizaapan].)⁵

Achitometl "was enthralled by the idea that she should reign and be a living goddess, so he surrendered her to the Aztecs."⁶ When she arrived in Tizaapan, the priests followed Huitzilopochtli’s instructions:

[They] took the young princess of Colhuacan, heiress to that kingdom, and killed her, sacrificing her to their god. They then flayed her and dressed one of the principal youths in her skin, as their deity had willed. Then they went to the sovereign of Colhuacan and invited him to come adore his own daughter and offer sacrifices to her as a goddess, since Huitzilopochtli had proclaimed her his bride and his mother.⁷

Or:

auh niman ye quimictia. yn quixipehua yn cihuapilli. yn oconxipeuhque yn iyehuayo nima ye conaquia. yn ce tlacatl tlamacazqui. Auh niman oquihto yn Huitzilopochtli. notlahuane tla xicnotzati yn achitometl.

(And then they killed and flayed the noblewoman. When they had flayed her, they then dressed a certain offering priest in her skin. And then Huitzilopochtli said: My fathers, summon Achitometl.)⁸

Achitometl accepted the Aztecs’ invitation to attend his daughter’s wedding and see the goddess, and when he arrived with rubber, copal, tobacco, flowers, and quail, Huitzilopochtli’s priests led him inside the dark temple:

nima ye conana yn holli. yn copalli. yn xochitl. yn iyetl yn tlacatlaqualli. ye quitlamamaca yxpan quitequillia yn can tlapic yteouh. in yehuatl yn oquixipeuhque. auh in yehuatl yn achitometl. niman ye yc yxpan quinquechcota yn çoçoltin, yn iteouh.

(Then he took up the rubber, the copal incense, the flowers, the tobacco, and the abstinence foods. He distributed, he laid them out before his pretended god, her whom they had flayed.)⁹
When Achitometl lit his brazier of incense, he was (understandably) shocked and horrified to see a priest enfl eshed in his daughter's skin: “yn achitometl cenca omomauhti.” (Achitometl was exceedingly terrifi ed.) He declared war upon the Mexicas, saying, “They have killed my daughter, they have fl ayed her and dressed a youth in her skin and have made me worship him!”

This vignette established the mythohistorical paradigm for the ritual process through which the Aztecs manufactured localized embodiments of their gods. The young Colhua woman's sacrifi ce brought about the apotheosis of Toci, Tonantzin in the person who wore the fl ayed skin. By virtue of wearing the skin, the ritual actor became the goddess. In this example, a human body became a god-body, but teteo (gods) and their teixiptlahuan (localized embodiments) took many forms in Aztec religion, including effigies made of natural materials and tlaquimiloll (sacred bundles) that contained precious objects. What might be surprising is that the manufacture of god-bodies has persisted well past Contact. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1574–1646) describes ritual specialists engaging in deity embodiment, and today speakers of modern Nahuatl preserve costumbres (traditions) that incorporate totiotzin (gods) made from paper into their daily lives.

While it would be misguided and misleading to claim that either Alarcón’s contemporaries or my own preserve “Aztec religion,” the idea that ritual activity—and most notably the intentional creation of deity embodiments—can affect nature and culture remains current among Nahuatl speakers. Narratives shared by Nahuatl speakers past and present provide the primary frame of reference for my examination of teotl (god), teixiptla (localized embodiment), and tlaquimiloll (sacred bundle). These three Nahuatl terms lie at the founda- tion of Aztec religion and fi nd their best expression in the stories about them. Accounts like the one above and those that follow situate these terms in scenarios where the actions of the gods and their embodiments have a direct and often immediate eff ect on the lives of their devotees. In the instance above, the Mexica patron deity guides his devotees toward their homeland, and in the process, they establish ritual models for practices the Aztecs continued into the early sixteenth century.

Myth, History, and Mythohistory: Studying the Gods of Nahua Religions

In the following, I will explore the questions of what teotl (god) meant in Aztec religion and how teteo (gods) came to be present in teixiptlahuan (localized embodiments). My work involves analyzing the terms' etymology, investigating their construction and functions, and exploring how they might prompt a
reexamination of existing theories of animacy, agency, and embodiment—all with an awareness of the concepts’ histories of interpretation. Throughout, I insist on the importance of understanding the terms and their visual and physical manifestations in context: in the context of Nahuatl or of the codex in which they appear or of the ritual stage upon which they acted. Interpreting *teotl* or *teixiptla* from only one vantage point—that of linguistics or iconography or (h)eology—would impede appreciating the relationship between *teteo* and their *teixiptlahuan*, let alone the ways in which devotees interacted with them. Understanding Nahua gods as mere names, as lifeless representations, or as supernatural essences separable from the bodies they inhabited fails to appreciate the fullness of their animacy and the intricacies of these religions.

One of the challenges of studying Nahua religions, especially that of the Aztecs, centers squarely on the kind, origin, and number of sources available to scholars. In this study of Aztec religion, I draw principally on alphabetic texts and codices, pictorial texts made in pre-Contact styles. The relative paucity of pre-Contact sources makes archaeological data and material culture essential to the work of interpreting Aztec culture. The lack of pre-Contact sources, a wealth of (variously biased) colonial sources, and the scholarly and cultural contributions of the modern descendants of Mesoamerican peoples simultaneously enrich and complicate reconstructions of pre-Contact Mesoamerica.

To further complicate matters, some of the best alphabetic sources are also the most problematic sources. For example, sixteenth-century friars’ descriptions of pre-Contact and early colonial Nahua culture offer unparalleled insight into their subjects, but they tend to see the New World through Old World eyes. After alphabetizing Nahuatl, which prior to Contact had been a spoken language represented by ideograms, friars produced numerous texts that served the religious and secular needs of the colonial project in New Spain. Their texts are indispensable tools in understanding pre-Contact and post-Contact religiosity, but the stories they tell are embedded in layers of conflicting motivations and cross purposes. Intentionally or not, they occlude as much as they reveal. My interpretations of these sources, their form and contents, depend both on understanding the cultures that produced them as well as on my awareness of the methods of study I bring to them. Modern critical theories’ potential to clarify the relationship between deities and their embodiments, for instance, depends on one’s willingness to engage in “reading” sources that rarely distinguish between categories taken for granted in the modern West: history and myth, natural and supernatural, or profane and sacred. Finding a way through history and myth is both a first step and a model for how I will interpret Aztec religion.
The extent to which accounts of Mesoamerica’s past are “history” or “myth” has been contested by Mesoamericanists at least since the time of German anthropologist Eduard Seler (1849–1922). (Seler came down squarely in favor of myth’s preponderance.) In a recent reprisal of this contestation, Federico Navarrete Linares argues that as long as we understand “myth” and “history” as mutually exclusive categories, neither can do justice to the rich stories codices, colonial texts, and contemporary voices tell about Mesoamerica.12 Thinking of myths as fictitious accounts embedded with symbols that need analysis and of history as a straightforward narration of events as they actually proceeded leads to continually misunderstanding both what might have happened and the importance of how Mesoamericans and colonial Mexicans narrated what they said happened.13 Michel-Rolph Trouillot underscores the importance of remembering that histories are produced by historical agents/narrators: “In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened.’ The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.”14 In Mesoamerica and many indigenous Mexican communities today, the symbolic potential of myths and the powerful claims of history function as complementary (rather than as competing) means of communicating about and engaging in the world.

Throughout this text, I read mythohistory as a version of historiography and Mesoamerican historiography as largely a product of the contact perspective that emerged during the Encounter. In The History of a Myth, Gary Urton uses the word “mythohistory” to signal the “potentially equal and simultaneous, and thus fully ambiguous, mythical and historical status of the accounts contained in [the Spanish chronicles].”15 I adopt this term in order to gesture to the shortcomings of both “history” and “myth” with respect to the texts produced in pre-Contact (oral and pictographic) and post-Contact (alphabetic and pictorial/pictographic) Nahuatl.16 Thinking of “historiography”—the writings produced about Mesoamerican religions—as mythohistory facilitates my examination of the ideological frameworks through which writers from the early colonial period until today have interpreted teotl, teixiptla, and tlaquimilolli.

In his introduction to Letters from Mexico, Anthony Pagden characterizes Cortés’s letters to Charles V as histories: “The two surviving manuscript copies of the letters, one in Vienna, the other in Madrid, are both compiled as if they constituted a history of the conquest, which in a sense they do.”17 In these letters, Cortés described his experiences in New Spain and intimated his expectations for the future, and he did this not just for the benefit of the king
but also for a public readership. Pagden makes the case that, for Cortés, the letters constituted a public relations campaign. To the extent that he included historical elements in the *cartas*, they served his own immediate needs, and with the help of his father, Cortés worked to ensure that each letter arrived in Spain as soon as possible and was immediately published.

Cortés was "acutely aware of the importance of arguing his case before posterity. If his *fama et gloria* which, as he knew, were the nobleman's most precious, and most precarious, possessions were to survive, they had to be preserved for later generations in his own words, and in print."¹⁸ Cortés's letters were not a history of the distant past nor were they intended to be a history for readers of the distant future. Neither were the letters, chronicles, and accounts of many other Contact-era writers. To the extent that some of them did provide accounts of the pre-Contact past, such as Durán in his *History of the Indies of New Spain* (ca. 1581), confining their texts to the genre of "history" would conceal other aspects of the stories they were telling, including those moments in which the religious imagination—whether of the author or his subjects—emerges.

The Work of Storytelling and Translation

The simultaneity and ambiguity that characterize Contact-era chronicles and modern Nahua accounts of the (super)natural world remind us of the tangled relationships between happening, experience, and storytelling. These were and are worlds in which devotees fashioned mountain-shaped deity embodiments and venerated mountains as god-bodies. Neither the fabricated nature of these enchanted *teixiptlahuan* (localized embodiments) nor the stories told about them detract from their lively participation in their communities; quite the opposite. In *Other Peoples' Myths*, a study of the stories told about stories, Wendy Doniger emphasizes the compelling action of myth, a characteristic we could extend to mythohistory:

The myth is persuasive to us because the *action* itself is persuasive. Even when what happens in the myth is not physically possible in this world (as when, for instance, a man turns into a fish), when the event is described in detail, as something that happened, we can *see* it happening, and so it enlarges our sense of what might be possible. Only a story can do this. Myth, then, is a story, or a narrative. How, then, is it different from other narratives, from the narratives of history or the narratives of legend? . . . Let me merely say that the stories that I want to talk
about as myths (and that I wish to distinguish from, for example, stories about George Washington or Paul Bunyan) are about the sorts of questions that religions ask, stories about such things as life after death, divine intervention in human lives, transformations, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture—and, basically, about meaning itself.  

The action of myth—what a myth does—concerns Doniger more than the definition of “myth.” What she calls the myth’s action is like effective speech. J. L. Austin called effective speech “performatives,” meaning the kind of talk that does what it says. The example of a groom’s “I do” wedding him to his betrothed demonstrates that the spoken word’s effective activity is not confined to myth or mythohistory. In bringing about what it says, effective speech powerfully fuses the worlds of thought, speech, and action. Effective speech explodes in the space of storytelling, where the suspension of disbelief opens hearers, who become Doniger’s “seers,” to the (im)possibilities of fantasy, mystery, violence, and the miraculous.

To draw an analogy, Native American literature reproduces storytelling spaces in which effective speech acts in the world. In Ceremony, for example, Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko (re)tells a story that illustrates myth’s action, story’s affective ability, and speech’s effective quality. In the novel’s account of the creation of white people, one witch outdoes all the others through storytelling. Instead of mixing foul brews, this one bewitches the rest with an account of “white skin people like the belly of a fish covered with hair” who travel across the ocean and bring with them evils that upend the world. In this myth, the storyteller’s words shape the (meaning of) the world:

. . . They see no life
When they look
they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive
the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and bear are objects
They see no life.

They fear
They fear the world.
They destroy what they fear.
They fear themselves.

They will bring terrible diseases
the people have never known.
Entire tribes will die out

Set in motion now
set in motion by our witchery
set in motion
to work for us.

They will take this world from ocean to ocean
they will turn on each other
they will destroy each other

Set in motion now
set in motion
To destroy
To kill
Objects to work for us
objects to act for us
performing the witchery

whirling
set into motion now
set into motion.

So the other witches said
“Okay you win; you take the prize,
but what you said just now—
it isn’t so funny
It doesn’t sound so good.
We are doing okay without it
we can get along without that kind of thing.
Take it back.
Call that story back.”

But the witch just shook its head
at the others in their stinking animal skins, fur and feathers.
The witch speaks the future into being by using the imperative mood to “set in motion” and “whirl” events into action. Or at least he or she seems to. As the novel’s reader, I know, however, that Silko has written this cosmogony and that she wrote it in the post-Contact, postcolonial world. Nonetheless, my knowledge of this neither changes the effective quality of the story within the novel nor does it dilute the meaning-making work of the myth. What the witch intends—to bring the world into being in a specific manner—works on me when I glimpse the story world as the witch describes it, if only for a moment. The witch describes a world I can envision, a world I can recognize: one in which Old World diseases decimated Native American populations. In Doniger’s words, “We can see it happening.” We can see it happening because it has happened, but we can also see it happening as the witch tells the story. The telling of the story brings about what (in the novel’s timeline) has yet to happen, but what we know will/did happen. Silko takes advantage of the effective quality of speech and the magic of storytelling to take her reader back to a time when a witch spoke the world into being the way it came to be. In Ceremony, she binds together the past and the present in ritual storytelling; she produces a mythohistorical account of the Encounter.

This foray into Ceremony, an experience and analysis of the effective quality of storytelling, brings into focus the significance of narratives as contexts and sources for understanding the Aztec cosmovision. After all, “setting aside the claims of authorship made by most sacred scriptures, we have no stories composed by gods. . . . But stories—myths—are one of our only sources of knowledge about the gods. And stories told by other peoples are one of our best sources of knowledge about them.” In order to understand better what the Aztecs meant by teotl, I look to the stories they told about their gods and about the stuff, people, and places they inhabited. Rather than translate the stories and their terms into more familiar ones—be they other traditions’ myths or the scholarly language used to describe other polytheistic systems—my aim is to work toward understanding what the Aztecs meant when they said, “teotl.”

Insofar as this book tells a story of Aztec gods, it does so by moving toward a clearer sense of teotl’s meaning. In the long run, this work leads to a more satisfactory understanding of human religiosity and the religious imagination, which are impossible to explain, “not because religiousness is inherently
mystifying, but because it responds to mystery, and because its data are always proliferating and changing the landscape of what can be known and hence interpreted. My analysis of teotl, teixiptla, and tlaquimilolli adds one more data point to conversations about what and who (the) G/god(s) are in Mesoamerican religions and the world’s religions. But understanding these Nahua concepts depends on meaning and context and not just translation.

Instead of simply glossing teotl as “god,” and assuming that my readers and I share a common sense of what a G/god is, in the following I outline some central qualities that teotl denoted and connoted in older Nahuatl. Rather than “translate” teotl, teixiptla, and tlaquimilolli, my intention is to hear their Nahuatl resonances when they are glossed as “god,” “localized embodiment,” or “sacred bundle.” What no one—not even a native speaker of modern Nahuatl—can do is be in direct contact with those words spoken in their native contexts. Richard Andrews addresses the complexities inherent in translation and the difficulties of negotiating the “translational mirage”—the illusion that reading a work in translation places the reader in contact with the original text. Andrews provides the following as a concrete example of the challenges scholars confront when they try to convey the meanings of Nahuatl words in another language:

While it is true that all human languages are mutually translatable and that every utterance in one has an analogue in another . . . the quality of meaning that the original utterance has for a native speaker of the source language is necessarily lost [in translation]. At times a translation is obvious because of the clarity of the analogue; for example, “I have become a widower” easily translates the Nahuatl onichiuhamic. But how does an Indo-European mind grasp the meaning of that utterance which “literally” says “already I woman-died.” . . . The meaning of the English utterance “I have become a widower” . . . has nothing in common with the meaning of the Nahuatl utterance onichiuhamic beyond the lowest common denominator of the analogous event. The particularity of the culturally controlled native-speaker experience as encapsulated in the linguistic expression is discarded and ignored. Nuances, connotations, implications, and suppositions—unconsciously understood and felt dimensions of the source texts (the entire range of the “unsaid” that every speaker of any language unwittingly employs in producing/interpreting the “said”)—are unavoidably replaced by other, different ones. Translational mirage hides all of this from a reader of a translation.
I do not work under the illusion that I can capture what Andrews describes as "the particularity of the culturally controlled native-speaker experience." But I can do more than translate *teotl* as "god" and assume that because I have some vague notion of what "god" means, I have a decent sense of what *teotl* meant. The difference between translating *teotl* and understanding its meaning is like the difference between translating a foreign text into one's own language (adapting a foreign concept in terms of the familiar) and acquiring fluency in a foreign language (adapting one's self in terms of the unfamiliar). In Andrews's estimation, language learning "should not be, as it almost always is, a mere pragmatic search for equivalences ('how does one say . . . ?'); it should be an anthropological quest for foreign meaning. That is, the goal should be meaning, not translation." Focusing on meaning rather than translation requires me to attend to the contexts in which *teixiptlahuan* (localized embodiments) became *teteo* (gods), work that has the potential to affect understanding Aztec religion (and not just *teotl*).

Speaking the Language of Today's *Totiotzin* (Gods)

In the summer of 2006, I began research on language and ritual animacy with Kelly McDonough and a group of modern Nahuatl-speaking colleagues, including Victoriano de la Cruz, Delfina de la Cruz, Catalina de la Cruz, and Sabina de la Cruz, at the Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Research in Ethnology (IDIEZ). Several aspects of the research we have conducted since then have made distinct impressions on how I see Aztec and modern Nahua religions. Modern Nahuatl speakers experience the world as a powerfully and pervasively animate place, an observation that Arturo Gómez Martínez and others have made concerning Nahua perceptions of liveliness in the natural environment. Native speakers from the Huasteca of Veracruz evaluate animacy along a spectrum, a form of folk taxonomy that maps the intersections of Nahuatl language and human observations of the natural and made world(s). Each speaker can locate every known object and entity along a spectrum of animacy. (Of course, not all speakers agree on the same assessment of every word.) They identify objects and entities as animate or inanimate based primarily on their ability to move, a sign of their liveliness. Depending on a noun's classification as animate or inanimate, it follows specific linguistic rules, including its affiliation with a particular "to be" verb and the composition of its plural form.

Nahuatl speakers recognize a wide spectrum of animate entities, and all nouns fall along a linguistic spectrum of animacy with respect to two char-
acteristics: which "to be" verb they regularly acquire, and whether they can be made plural (Figure 1.1). In the modern Nahuatl worldview, two "to be" verbs—

\[\text{itztoc}\] and \[\text{eltoc}\]—indicate whether a noun is animate or inanimate. \[\text{Itztoc}\], from the verb \[\text{itta}\], means "for a person or animal to be someplace or in some state" and functions with subjects that are animate. \[\text{Eltoc}\], "to be," functions with inanimate nouns. When asked whether a noun is animate or inanimate, a modern speaker may have an immediate answer because of the word's obvious nature; such was the case for the highly animate \[\text{totiotzin}\] or essentially inanimate \[\text{tetl}\] (rocks), for instance.

A classificatory system—including one that functions along a spectrum—may appear to make neat and tidy divisions among terms and concepts. However, most nouns fall somewhere between the extremes of high animacy and inanimacy, and native speakers are not always certain of how to classify a term or concept. For example, when we talked about \[\text{mixtli}\] (cloud/clouds), native speakers Catalina and Sabina debated whether clouds take \[\text{itztoc}\] or \[\text{eltoc}\] for several minutes. As they considered \[\text{mixtli}\]'s animacy, they thought about the characteristics of clouds, and they discussed the qualities of the word "cloud(s)." They considered the possible animacy of the thing—a cloud—based on their observations of it and also on how the noun \[\text{mixtli}\]
functions in Nahuatl. Movement is important in determining the animacy of an object or entity, so one of the native speakers’ tests was to ask if a cloud nehmemi (walks). They agreed that clouds move because the winds blow them, not because they go from place to place of their own volition or under their own power. They also noted that clouds could be classified in three of the major categories they identified along the spectrum: totiotzin (gods), cuerpos celestiales (heavenly bodies), or inorgánicos (inorganic material). Mixtli, they said, does not have a plural form, which would indicate that it is inanimate and takes eltoc. They found themselves caught between knowing that clouds move, an indication that they are animate, and feeling constrained by the fact that mixtli has no plural form, an indication that clouds are inanimate. This exercise in the exploration of Nahuatl’s linguistic ideology illustrates the negotiations that take place when Nahuatl speakers examine the relationship between their language, the elements and entities of the perceptible world, and their cosmovision. It also demonstrates that the spectrum is not a rigid system of immutable classifications, but rather one shaped by modern speakers’ sense of Nahuatl and the world.

We repeated this exercise again and again over the course of a summer. Based on a series of conversations during which native speakers examined the animacy of more than seventy-five nouns, they determined that nouns that take itztoc fall within five identifiable categories. At one end of the animacy spectrum, totiotzin (gods) have the most animacy, and Tohueyinanan (divine personage: our great mother) and Tohueyitatah (divine personage: our great father)—the mother and father of the prototypical family—are the most animate gods.

Moving in order of descending animacy, the second group collects luminous celestial bodies, including citlalin (stars), tonatiuh (sun), metztli (moon), and Dios (God). Curiously, these modern Nahuatl speakers locate Dios alongside celestial entities rather than with the totiotzin. The third classification includes features of the more immediate natural world, such as tepetl (mountain), atl (water), tlalli (earth), tilitl (fire), and ehecatl (wind). My colleagues labeled this category as “tlen oncah” (what exists) and explained that because all of these features of the natural world “tienen dueño” (have owners), they are also totiotzin. They were reluctant to rank these deities as “less important” than the parental pair, but on other occasions, they described the celestial bodies and earthly phenomena as having less animacy than the Tohueyinanan and Tohueyitatah.

Modern speakers recognize two categories of human beings, macehualmeh (Nahuatl speakers) and coyomeh (nonspeakers), both of which belong to the
fourth group of animate entities. Tecuanimeh (wild animals) and tlapiyalmeh (domestic animals) compose the next category. Finally, some modern speakers class xihuitl (grass, plant life) as animate because it exhibits movement in the form of growth. All of these entities take the animate “to be” verb itztoc.

Most modern speakers identify two groups of inanimate nouns that use the second “to be” verb, eltoc. Eltoc means “to be (inanimate subjects).” For speakers who do not recognize plant life as animate, the first eltoc group includes xihuitl (grass, plant life), and tetl (rocks) compose the second. By contrast to nouns that take itztoc, words in these groups usually have identical singular and plural forms, like the English word “moose.” In certain contexts, particularly that of ritual manufacture, some inanimate materials become highly animate teteo and acquire a plural form, although they would not ordinarily do so. I will explore this transformation shortly.

As an all-encompassing taxonomy, the spectrum of animacy organizes every animate and inanimate entity in the modern Nahuatl world. Despite the order it imposes on (or observes in) modern Nahuatl and native speakers’ cosmovision, the spectrum is not static. It reveals Nahuatl speakers’ cosmological and linguistic capacities to integrate foreign entities, like Dios, into the existing taxonomic structure. Further, it definitively demonstrates that Nahuatl speakers have ways of visualizing and organizing their cosmos and its inhabitants that differ from—and sometimes defy—Western modes of classification.

The organization of inanimate materials and animate beings along the spectrum is neither fixed nor static. Because the qualities of objects and entities change depending on their environmental, ontological, and linguistic contexts, the question of animacy remains relative and relevant: relative to the social agency a speaker perceives in or attributes to an object or entity and relevant to the dynamics of language in the lifeworld. Thus, the spectrum of animacy provides an analytical framework for understanding some of the ontological changes brought about in rituals like Chicomexochitl (7 Flower), an annual rite of agricultural renewal and petition for rain and beneficence. One such transformation involves the ritual manufacture of highly animate and beloved totiotzin (gods) from everyday paper.

Chicomexochitl (7 Flower) and the Totiotzin

In communities where modern Nahuatl speakers maintain costumbres (traditional practices), ritual manufacture in ceremonies like Chicomexochitl (7 Flower) brings about ontological transformations in ordinary materials that become highly animate entities. In the summers of 2006 and 2010, I attended a celebration of Chicomexochitl in the Huasteca of Veracruz as a guest of the
sponsoring family and acted as a participant observer. My experiences of the ceremony and the interviews I conducted with participants in 2010 indicate that they perceive the transformations these entities experience through their change in shape, their treatment by ritual participants, and the way macehualmeh (Nahuatl speakers) talk about the beings.

Watching the manufacture and animation of totiotzin impressed upon me modern Nahuatl speakers’ perception of the world as fundamentally and pervasively animate. The rules of modern Nahuatl state that inanimate materials and objects take a specific verb and cannot be made plural. However, many modern Nahuatl speakers participate in ceremonies during which materials with no (or relatively low) animacy become highly animate totiotzin through their ritual manufacture, and the adults who sponsor these ceremonies adopt the totiotzin into their families as their children. Modern Nahuatl expresses the world’s animacy by categorizing every object and entity as either animate or inanimate, and Nahuatl speakers use ritual to transform inanimate materials into venerable animate entities.

During this (roughly) annual celebration, participants manufacture a family of six totiotzin, and in the process, the inanimate objects ceremonially transform into animate entities, a ritual act that effects change along the spectrum of animacy. The most obvious shift in animacy takes place within the Chicomexochitl, the six totiotzin at the center of the ritual. Over a period of a few days, the tepahtihquetl (ritual officiant) cuts ordinary store-bought amatl (paper) into tlatecmeh (paper figures of natural deities used in ceremonies) that come to embody the highly animate Chicomexochitl, Tohueyinan (mother), Tohueyitatah (father), and their four children, whom the participants venerate throughout the year.

During Chicomexochitl, ritual participants manufacture an extravagant assortment of offerings, including thousands of paper cutouts and hundreds of bundled reeds. A group of (mostly) female participants prepare bundles of palm fronds and other floral arrangements. If there is not other work to be done, some men assist in making the reed bundles. Meanwhile, other women prepare elaborate meals and clothing for the six colorful paper effigies that represent the Chicomexochitl family, the ceremony’s focus (see Figure I.4). Men clear brush from the path up the altepetl (water mountain; community) to the ceremony’s altars. During this time, the tepahtihquetl and a few male assistants create thousands of paper cutouts representing elements of the natural world, including beans, chilies, and corn, and the family of six Chicomexochitl figures.

Depending on the tepahtihquetl’s stamina, Chicomexochitl preparations last about four days. Dancing punctuates ongoing ritual activities. Each eve-
I.2. The tepahtliquetl and his assistant stand behind the Chicomexochitl and totiotzin. Photograph by author.
ning (and throughout the day), the ritual participants gather in the home of the family sponsoring Chicomexochitl and dance in a circle around the te-
pahtihquetl, who continues cutting the tlatecmeh. They take turns censing the Chicomexochitl activities and offerings with copal while a band of three men, playing a guitar, a classical guitar, and a violin, play atonal songs that invite the presence of nature spirits into the ritual.39 One afternoon near the end of the ritual’s preparations, the participants gather to dance while the women dress the Chicomexochitl figures. They dress the figures in hand-sewn clothes and store-bought accessories. Each member of the Chicomexochitl family has a distinct look (Figure I.4).

On the final day, all of the participants and the offerings undergo a limpia (cleansing) before going up the altepetl. The community identifies the altepetl’s summit with Xochicalco (Flower House), the home of the Chicomexo-
I.4. (above) Ritual participants dress members of the Chicomexochitl family. Photograph by author.

I.5. (left) The tepachtli/ sprinkles blood on the altar following an avian sacrifice. Photograph by author.
chitl. Once the group arrives on the altepetl’s summit, the tepahtihquetl hangs the bag containing the Chicomexochitl effigies above the center of the summit’s principal altar. From there, the Chicomexochitl family observes the decoration of a series of altars and the arrangement of offerings. Participants cover the largest altar table with sheets of paper cutouts representing beans, corn, and chilies. Members of the sponsoring family hold two chickens and a turkey while the tepahtihquetl feeds them sips of soda and beer. After “intoxicating” the birds with these luxury beverages, the tepahtihquetl uses scissors

1.6. The completed altepetl altar. Photograph by author.
to cut their necks, and the three family members pass the birds over the altar and beneath it. The birds’ blood soaks into the paper cutouts and the earth. The tepanitlahquetl then pours libations on and beneath the altar. The participants complete the offering by arranging food, beverages, and bundles on the altar.

In addition to the altar above which the Chicomexochtli family hangs, a second altar features a hole dug into the ground in which participants place a
living chicken. They complete this avian offering to the earth by covering the hole with papers tacked to the ground over which they place reeds and other offerings. They arrange a third altar/offering of baby chick voladores (fliers) atop a stand from which they string four colored ribbons in the four directions (Figure 1.7).

Walking from the community up the mountain, arranging the altars and offerings, offering a series of prayers (for good crops, good relationships, and a good year), completing a second limpia for anyone suffering from illness or injury, and walking back down the altepetl takes the better part of a day. As the ceremony draws to a close, one of the participants carries the Chicomexochitl figures back down the mountain, and they reside on the home altar of the family that sponsored the ceremony for the next year. Before the group feasts, they accompany the tepahtihquetl to the pozo (well), where they make a final series of offerings and petition rain. The day culminates in a meal of pork tamales made from a hog that the men slaughter for the occasion. The community performs Chicomexochitl primarily to invoke rain, and they consider it to have been successful if rain comes within four days of the festival’s close.

Making a Modern God

During the course of Chicomexochitl, the paper figures transform from inanimate/eltoc amatl (paper) into animate/itztoc tlatecmeh (paper figures of natural deities). By the ceremony’s end, the sponsors recognize the Chicomexochitl effigies as living beings and family members. The parents of the sponsoring family refer to the Chicomexochitl figures as their children, and throughout the year, they feed them, change their clothes, and talk to them. After witnessing the ceremony in 2006 and learning about the spectrum of animacy, I became interested in how this transformation occurs. Specifically, I wondered how ordinary sheets of paper become totiotzin. When I returned to the community in 2010 to participate in Chicomexochitl, I conducted a series of short interviews focused on the nature of the ceremony and the participants’ perception of the Chicomexochitl deities. I interviewed three women and three men, including the tepahtihquetl. In these conversations, I learned more about how participants perceive Chicomexochitl. For example, they explained that the altepetl’s summit is Xochicalco, the home of the Chicomexochitl, and that by contrast to the gods, whom they envision as adults, the Chicomexochitl are seen to be children: “zohuapiltzitzin huan oquichpipiltzitzin yanopa” (these, yes they are small girls and boys). The women described the foods they prepared and contributed to the altars as both coming from and sustaining the gods.
The people I interviewed affirmed that animacy pervades the Nahua life-world. *Altepemeh* (mountains) occupy a singularly important position in the Nahua cosmovision. In his study of contemporary Nahua cosmovisions, Andrés Medina Hernández begins his explanation of sacred geography by describing the centrality of water and mountains:

El agua y los cerros son dos referentes fundamentales en la percepción del paisaje para los campesinos nahuas. Los cerros son entidades vivas a las que se atribuyen relaciones amorosas y conflictivas entre sí; entre ellos se establece una jerarquía de acuerdo con su altura; esto remite a su condición de ejes cósmicos que relacionan a los tres niveles espaciales, el cielo, la tierra y el inframundo; es a través de los cerros como se puede entrar en comunicación con las entidades que los habitan y que inciden poderosamente en la existencia humana.

The water and the mountains are two fundamental referents in Nahua farmers’ perception of the landscape. The mountains are living entities to which are attributed loving and contentious relationships; their heights establish a hierarchy among them; this explains their condition as cosmic axes that connect three spatial levels, the sky, the earth, and the underworld; it is through the hills that one may enter into communication with the entities that inhabit them and that powerfully affect human existence.45

When Victoriano de la Cruz, my colleague and research assistant, and I asked one of the women with whom we spoke if she considered the *altepetl* adjacent to her community to be alive, she began her response with reference to the hill’s water: “Quena, ne yoltoc. Ne yoltoc. Pampa tlan titlecozceh huetziqui atl huan tlan axcanah quitlacualtihequeh axcanah huetziqui atl. Quemman tlatomoni tlanaquilia. Quemman axcanah tlanaquilia porque axtlananquilia porque axquitlacualtihtoqueh.” (Yes, it’s alive. It’s alive. Because if we go up to the waterfall and don’t take food, the water won’t fall. When there is thunder, they [the mountains] answer. When they don’t answer, when there is no answer, it’s because we haven’t fed them.)46 She went on to explain that the mountains’ need for food demonstrates their animacy, as do the conversations the mountains have with one another: “Quemman tlatomoni ne piltetzin no como tlanaquilia. No tlatomoni quehuac. Ne quennopa ne piltetzin.” (When it thunders, it is as if this hill also answers. It also responds. That’s the way the
In other words, she explained, when we hear thunder and its echo, what we are hearing is one hill speaking and another replying. The mountains, thunder-talkers and homes to the gods, participate in both the natural world and the manufactured world. They are, in Bruno Latour’s words, fetishes: “As a noun, it means form, figure, configuration, but as an adjective, artificial, fabricated, factitious and finally, enchanted . . . Yes, the fetish is a ‘talk-maker.’”48 These mountains traverse the (super)natural because their community forms them and is formed by them, fabricates them and is made by them, and enchant them and, yes, is enchanted by them. These thunderous entities are, quite literally, “talk-makers.” They talk, and they are the subject of talk.

Modern Nahuas—like their Aztec ancestors—perceive the mountains as features of the natural landscape that interact with proximate elements and entities. Rather than demarcate the animate god living on or in the mountain from the inanimate mountain, for instance, they describe the totiotzin as the mountain, the mountain as the totiotzin, the mountain as a mountain, and the mountain-talk as echoing thunder. Their designation of these entities’ animacy derives from their observation of the ways in which they relate (socially) and communicate. By virtue of talking and being talked about—aspects of their manufacture and (super)natural state—altepemeh occupy a relational, if not social, location in the modern Nahua cosmovision; the mountain is a mountain, and it is also more than a mountain because modern Nahuas have made it so. After all, “in all our activities, what we fabricate goes beyond us.”49

(That said, it is worth observing, as have Christopher Pinney and Webb Keane, that “we must consider the ways in which material things work independently of, or in contradiction to, their discursive surround. Otherwise we risk treating humans as if their capacity to endow the world with meaning had no limits, and, I [Keane] would add, as if the world could hold no further surprises for them.”50)

To return for a moment to a specific instance of manufacture, the tepahtihquetl’s explanation of how the paper Chicomexochitl figures acquired animacy underscores the autonomy generated in the ritual manufacture of deity embodiments. In the process of manufacturing tlatecmeh, the inanimate amatl (paper) comes to embody highly animate deities, totiotzin and Chicomexochitl, a transformation that registers linguistically and ontologically.51 By contrast to amatl, which takes the verb eltoc, totiotzin and Chicomexochitl acquire the animate “to be” verb itztoc. When I asked the tepahtihquetl what brought about this change and when it happened, he acknowledged that
the tlatecmeh started out as “puro papel” (only paper), and in response to my question of whether there is a moment in the ritual when they take on life, he replied, “nopa nopa yanopa mismo yanopa eltocca ne testigoh mochihuahya como vivos por eso tiqintlanakahya ma mopresentarocan es en el momento de la invocación pero también en la vestimentah ajá.” (Now, right now and with this witness, they are made as if they were alive, and because of this we lift them up so that they are presented in the moment of the invocation. But also right when they are dressed.) The tepatihquetl acknowledged that because they are “made as if they are alive”—that is, they have physical bodies and sensory capabilities—the community recognized them as the totiotzin. He went on to explain that even though they may have been born in a faraway place—in Xalapa, in the north, from near the sea—“huallazceh tlananatianih . . . huallaz mopresentaroqui nican . . . eso sí, le hemos dado un vestigo, una medalla, un arete.” (The powers that be will come . . . they will come and present themselves here . . . this yes, we have given a little vest, a medal, an earring.) In both descriptions, he emphasized the importance of the gods’ clothing and insignia. Then in the rhythmic cadence of a secret-keeping storyteller, he reminded me that he was 70 years old, that his teacher had been 125 years old when he died, and that it had been years since he himself had had training. In that time, he had forgotten many of the names of “los cortes” (the cuts, cutouts), but each tlatectli (cutout) had its own name. During the ritual, he explained, the Chicomexochitl acquire animacy when they are raised up, offered an invocation, and dressed.

These deities’ presence extends far beyond their linguistic attributes and ritual animation into the daily lives of those who care for them, and the total incorporation of these highly animate gods into an ordinary family represents the quintessence of modern Nahua cosmology. The modern Nahuatl spectrum of animacy reflects the linguistic transformation of ritually animated entities, and while it is possible to discuss the two—language and ritual—separately, they act in cosmological concert. Animacy functions along a spectrum, and the spectrum encompasses everything in the world—even those entities outsiders might assume dwell beyond the limits of this world.

Like modern-day Nahua speakers, the Aztecs understood life and being as existing along a continuum that did not (and still does not) draw hard-and-fast distinctions between the (in)animate, the (super)natural, or the (super)human. Rather, they evaluated life, liveliness, and godlikeness according to a folk taxonomy that collected qualitative clusters. As seems reasonable, Aztec devotees expected the teixiptla (localized embodiment) of a teotl (god) to be recognizable, and the qualities that clustered around par-
ticular *teteo* (gods) both defined their personae and rendered them identifiable. Inasmuch as this book is about grasping how the Aztecs conceived of and produced their *teteo, teixiptlahuan, and tlaquimilollon*, it is also an opportunity to examine how scholars perceive and represent religions like those of the Nahuas: religions whose proliferating pantheons challenge modes of and models for G/god(s), religions whose attribution of life to things made by human hands confounds common conceptions of immanence and transcendence, belief and the believable.