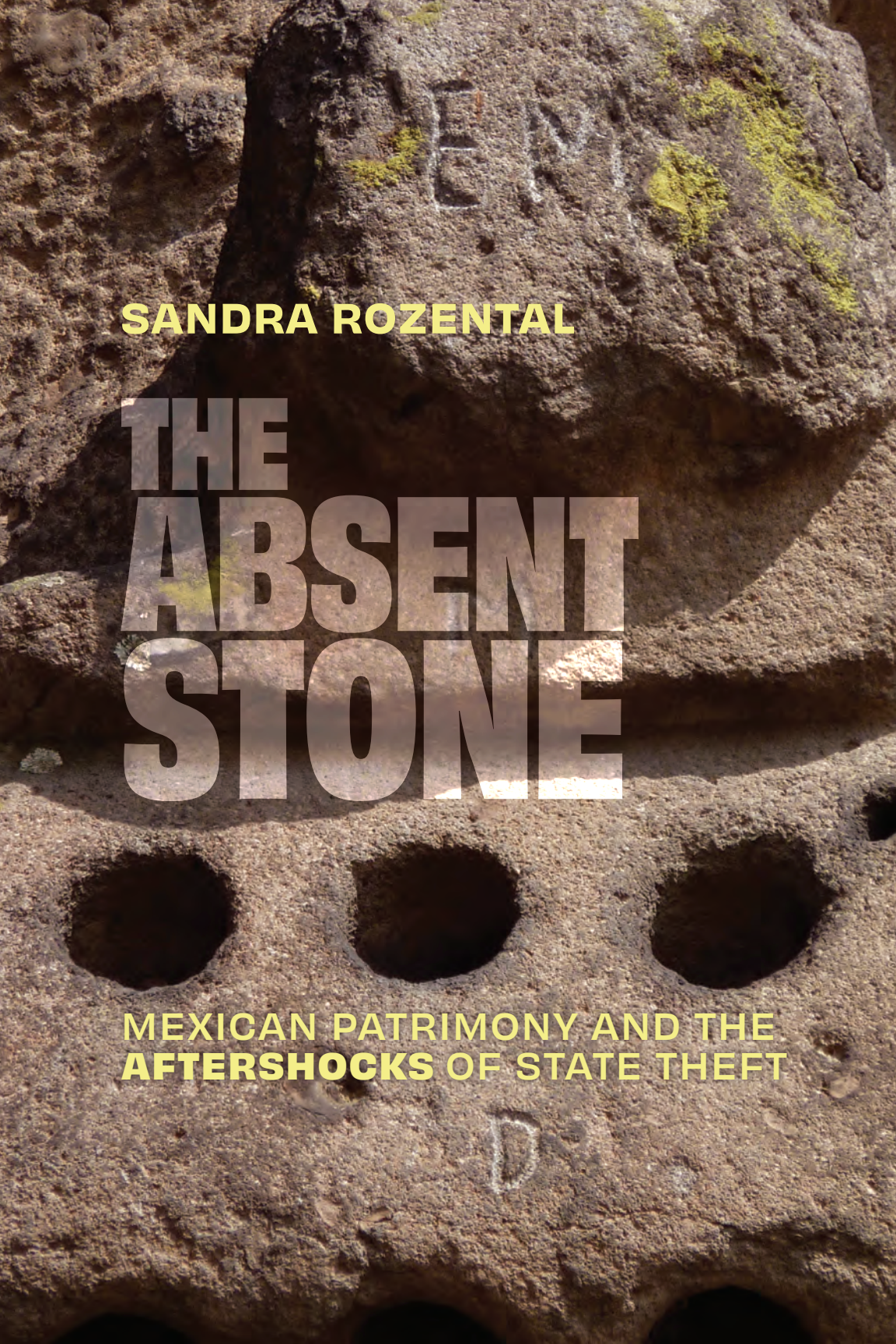

SANDRA ROZENTAL

THE ABSENT STONE

MEXICAN PATRIMONY AND THE **AFTERSHOCKS** OF STATE THEFT

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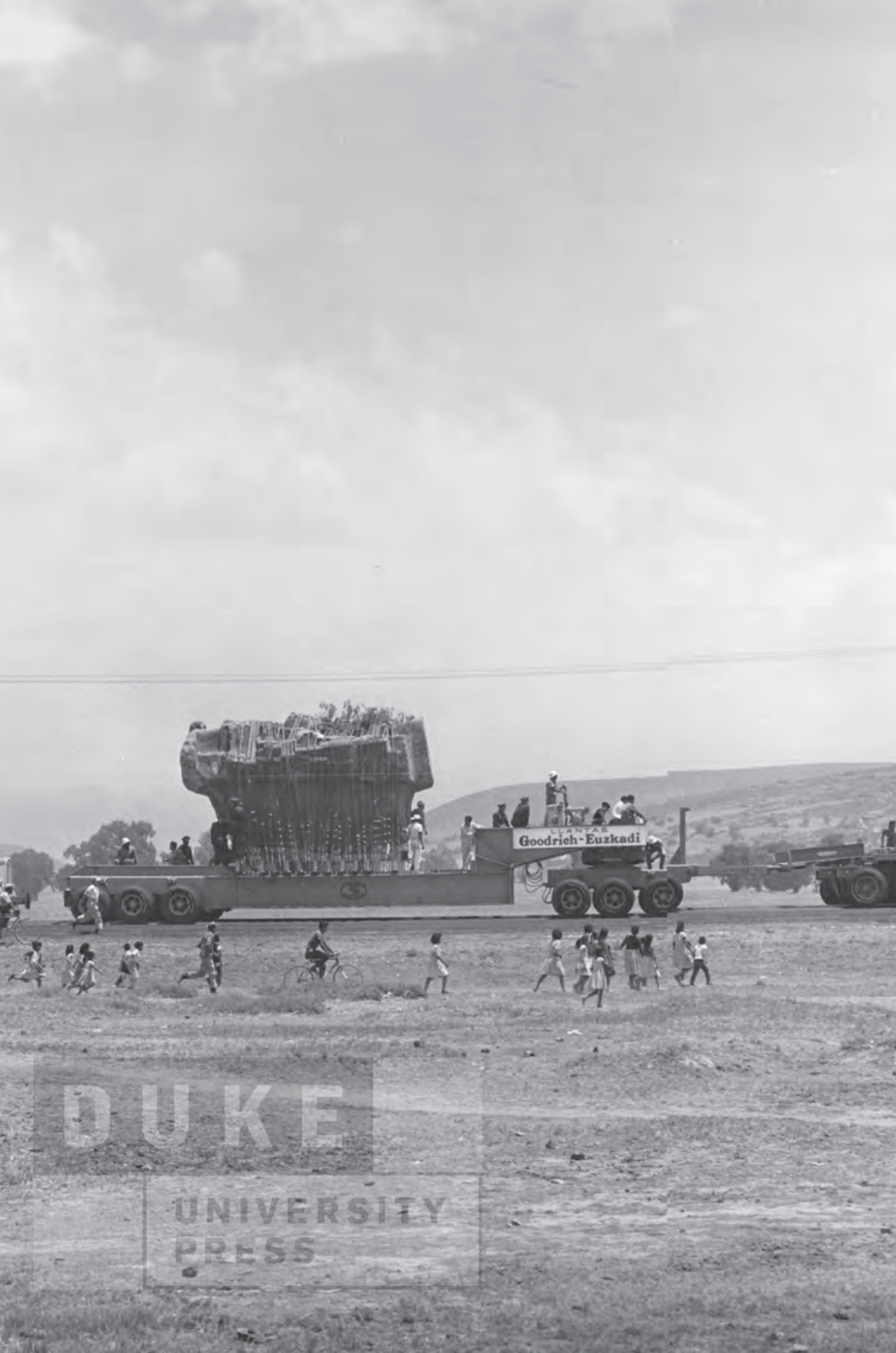

The Absent Stone

Mexican Patrimony and the Aftershocks of State Theft

SANDRA ROZENTAL

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2026

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Livia Tenzer
Cover designed by Dave Rainey
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Rozental, Sandra, author.
Title: The absent stone : Mexican patrimony and the aftershocks of state theft / Sandra Rozental.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025026245 (print)
LCCN 2025026246 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478033127 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478029663 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478061878 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico) | Aztec sculpture—Mexico—Coatlinchán. | Indian sculpture—Mexico—Coatlinchán. | Aztec sculpture—Mexico—Mexico City. | Indian sculpture—Mexico—Mexico City. | Tlaloc (Aztec deity) | Aztec gods. | Mexico—Antiquities.
Classification: LCC F1219.76.S35 R694 2026 (print) | LCC F1219.76.S35 (ebook)
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025026245
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025026246

Frontis: The stone on the move, April 16, 1964. Photograph courtesy of Acervo Arquitecto Pedro Ramírez Vázquez.

Cover art: La Piedra de los Tecomates, Mexico City, detail. Photograph by Sandra Rozental.

Para Vivian, Andrés y Tamara
que me enseñaron a seguir las piedras

Para Ulises, Micaela y Sasha
que son mis brújulas en el camino

Y para la y lo Tlacuaches
que me permitieron acompañarles en su andar

Since we were little, as soon as we learned to walk, my mother took us out to the fields and taught us to look at the ground and find things. Not just potsherds, but stones too. Pretty, polished stones. We would collect them all.

—DULCE GALICIA GONZÁLEZ, in the film *The Absent Stone*

Rocks are in time in a different way than living things are, even the ancient trees. But then, the other thing about rocks is that they are place. Rocks are what a place is made of to start with and after all. They are under everything else in the world, dirt, water, street, house, air, launching pad. The stone is at the center.

—URSULA K. LE GUIN, "Three Rock Poems"

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Introduction

Shortly before midnight, a low-bed trailer carrying a massive, 167-ton, pre-Hispanic stone lurched down Mexico City's avenues under a heavy downpour.[1] Teams of electricians and engineers in hard hats led the way, carefully lifting cables and wires crisscrossing the city overhead to assure the vehicle's safe passage. People lined the route, cheering on the arrival of the convoy. A festive procession of trucks, cars, bicycles, and hundreds more, unencumbered by the rain, followed behind on foot. Under colorful bursts of streamers and confetti, the stone arrived at the Plaza de la Constitución, the city's central square and symbolic heart of the nation.

It was April 16, 1964. For months, the national media had fueled expectations, commenting on every detail of the stone's impending transportation from San Miguel Coatlinchan, a small town barely thirty-five miles east of the capital. Reporters and photojournalists marveled at each stage of the unfolding feat: the excavation on site; the route carefully prepared; new roads being

built; old roads repaved, widened, and reinforced to bear the stone's enormous weight. Now the stone headed to the new Museo Nacional de Antropología under construction in the Bosque de Chapultepec.[2]

The volcanic rock chosen as the museum's emblem was born from deep geological time. Later, ancient peoples who thrived in what is now central Mexico carved it into a rough, perhaps unfinished, anthropomorphic figure. For centuries, the stone lay buried in a ravine in Coatlinchan, covered and uncovered by a succession of environmental forces, erosion, and human curiosity. Lacking features that might offer more definitive clues to trace its connection with a specific group or historical period, archaeologists debated whether or not the stone represented the storm god Tlaloc, one of the most important entities in the Mesoamerican pantheon. Its possible attribution was not lost on onlookers who imputed its spectacular and very wet arrival in the city in what was still the Mexican dry season to the abiding powers of ancient deities to tame or unleash the environmental forces that have for millennia governed life and death in the Valley of Mexico.

As the procession was broadcast live on national television, the camera panned the square, revealing the immensity of the crowd gathered to greet the stone. In a solemn and dramatic voice, over the sound of the trailer's deafening sirens, the newscaster announced: "Arriving just now on the Plaza de la Constitución, very close to where a great coup overthrew ancient Tenochtitlan and where Moctezuma's palace once stood, the most gigantic, the most beautiful, and the heaviest effigy sculpted by the people of Teotihuacan, the God of Gods, of mountains, of fertility, and of rain—Tlaloc—has finally arrived in Mexico's capital." In locating the stone's manufacture in Teotihuacan—one of the oldest settlements in the Valley of Mexico—and reminding viewers that Mexico City's central square was once the seat of the powerful Aztec empire, the newscaster celebrated the relocation from Coatlinchan to the capital as the climax of a project begun almost two thousand years earlier. Other media followed suit, compressing centuries of ancient and colonial history, political fragmentation, and conflict to present the stone's movement as "Tlaloc's pilgrimage, five centuries after his empire" (figure I.1).

Lauding the relocation as a national triumph, government officials boasted that both the monument—likely the product of a powerful regime able to harness the labor and manpower to sculpt and eventually move a block of such proportions—and the contemporary low-bed made to transport it were the products of timeless Mexican engineering. This was the same engineering at work building state infrastructures to foster national development all over the country: roads, dams, and public works imagined to connect and modernize but also control the nation's territories. Driven by a Cold War zeitgeist,

FIGURE 1.1. "De Coatlinchan a Chapultepec: Peregrinación de Tlaloc, cinco siglos después de su imperio" (From Coatlinchan to Chapultepec: Tlaloc's pilgrimage five centuries after his empire). Front page, *El Universal*, April 17, 1964.

FIGURE I.2. The stone leaving Coatlinchan surrounded by armed soldiers, April 16, 1964. "Tlaloc-Imagen 2," HMA/CRI/19055, Fondo Archivo Fotográfico Hermanos Mayo, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

the undertaking equated the conquest of space—on Earth and beyond—with power in the international arena, intended to place Mexico on the world political stage. The same newspapers covered the impending relocation's progress alongside reports on the launch of space satellites and the exploits of Yuri Gagarin, famed as the first man to orbit the Earth.

Government officials proclaimed the stone's relocation as a rescue, an operation that would guarantee its conservation as a national heirloom belonging under the care and custody of state patrimonial institutions and experts rather than languishing, exposed and abandoned, in a remote gorge. When town residents tried to stop its removal, these arguments justified the government's use of force and the military's intervention to subdue their opposition. The stone was ultimately removed from Coatlinchan under an escort of dozens of armed soldiers (figure I.2).

The stone's forced relocation and the engineering required to perform this feat were part of efforts to bring together Mexico's ancient past and its progress-oriented present in ways that made it seem as if Mexico as a nation and a political project was as old and monolithic as the ancient basaltic stone. Yet Mexico's "miracle," as this time of state-led modernization financed by recent

FIGURE I.3. The stone as the centerpiece of the fountain in front of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 2010. Photograph by the author.

economic growth became known, cannot be dissociated from the postrevolutionary regime's seven decades of single-party rule, including episodes of authoritarianism and repression under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party).[3] This culminated in the Tlatelolco student massacre only four years after the stone was forcefully taken from Coatlinchan, when on October 2, 1968, the government violently suppressed a peaceful meeting of students and workers calling for democratization, arresting and killing an estimated several hundred.[4] The dimensions of this state crime are still unknown.

Since 1964, the stone has stood watch over Mexico City as the centerpiece of a circular fountain on the Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico's most emblematic and statue-laden avenue (figure I.3).[5] Although it has a catalog number like the rest of the museum's collections, it is the only artifact placed outside its perimeter. It stands on a busy city street corner, exposed to the elements and the vibrations and emissions of passing traffic. Birds and insects have made its cracks and crevices their home.[6] The stone's placement in public space has become so familiar to city residents who, like me, were born after its epic journey that

they rarely stop to question where it came from or how it came to stand in its monumental solitude in front of the museum.

For the first two decades following its relocation, only the words "Museo Nacional de Antropología" were emblazoned on the fountain's white marble base. In 1984, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the relocation, the museum added a small bronze plaque inside the fountain's verdant waters. It reads: "This monolith was found in the surroundings of the town of San Miguel Coatlinchan, Estado de México, whose residents generously donated it to this museum in 1964. The monumental statue is unfinished and represents a water deity, a central element in the lifeways of the residents of the agricultural city of Teotihuacan who carved it. Teotihuacan Culture, Classic Period (100 to 850 A.D.)." The tarnished plaque, only legible up close, presents the stone as a generic representation of an ancient deity, reworking its forced dispossession from Coatlinchan, its theft by the state, as a "generous donation." As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argues, the silences folded into historical narratives are revealing of how violence, structures of power, and inequality operate and how they continue to haunt the spaces where those histories unfolded. Through silence and omission, the plaque transformed the stone's place of origin—not even Coatlinchan but its "surroundings"—into a mere detail of its biography, with no mention of the acts of military repression deployed to discipline, threaten, and subjugate its residents who tried to stop its removal and who to this day mourn and live with its loss.

This book, in contrast, documents this stone's theft and the generative effects of its absence in Coatlinchan. In doing so, it unravels the many possibilities of association and attachment that accrue as layers of time and relations condense into and emerge from the stone as place. Here I borrow from Ursula K. LeGuin, who notes that "rocks are place" (see the book's second epigraph). Engaging the stone ethnographically, paying attention to the enduring traces of its absence—the aftershocks of its theft—shows how this stone that was taken from Coatlinchan and converted into a monument by the Mexican state continues to linger, affect, and shape the place it was found in, but also made of, "to start with and after all" (Le Guin 1987, 55).

Desde que se llevaron la Piedra

I first visited Coatlinchan in 2005, arriving on one of the many *combis* that shuttle between Mexico City and this densely populated area of the Texcoco Municipality in the Estado de México.[7] Braving hours in traffic, these minibuses take construction workers, students, and office employees back and forth between

their pueblos and the city.[8] Travelers carry bulky bags full of merchandise purchased in city markets or flip through folders of paperwork from banks, hospitals, and government offices, located either in Mexico City or the still more distant state capital, Toluca. Meandering past twisted under- and overpasses, the city slowly gives way to a large stretch of urban sprawl, with warehouses and stalls selling auto parts and scrap metal. Coatlinchan's lush hills, crisscrossed by ravines and dry riverbeds that once flowed into the ancient Texcoco lake, drained over centuries to make way for urban expansion, stand out from what the region's residents pejoratively call "la mancha urbana" (the urban stain).[9] Towns like Coatlinchan, once surrounded by communal forests and agricultural lands where campesinos grew and harvested maize and subsistence crops, have increasingly taken on grayish hues, buried under a labyrinth of asphalt roads and large low-income housing developments.[10]

The combi was full of passengers, so I sat in the front, next to a man whose weight shifted into my shoulder as the vehicle turned onto González, the road that leads into Coatlinchan off the main highway. Apologizing, he asked candidly: "You going to Coatlinchan, huh? You sure? Coat-linchan? *Donde linchan* [where people lynch]?"[11] His play on words was, to say the least, unsettling. Sensing my discomfort, he explained that he was from Papalotla, a nearby town, but his uncle had married a woman from Coatlinchan. "My mother never liked her," he announced. "She always said: 'Never trust a Tlacuache; they will steal from you when you least expect it.' . . . Just be careful. And keep your belongings close!" This was how I first found out that the town I was heading to, to study the effects of state theft, had a reputation for violence and that its residents were known as Tlacuaches, or possums, an animal itself associated with rapacious behavior and theft. This ambivalence would define my time there and my thinking.

Coatlinchan's main square, the Plazuela, marks the entrance to the town. The sixteenth-century church devoted to the town's patron, the archangel San Miguel, and its adjacent cloister, originally built in 1528 and one of the first Franciscan missions in New Spain, flank the square to the west.[12] To the south, a building that used to be an early twentieth-century schoolhouse now serves as the town authorities' headquarters, the Delegación. An array of small businesses dots the square, selling roast chickens on rotating spits, cakes, medicine, popsicles, and cell phone accessories, all to the rhythms of techno-cumbias and reggaeton. Other buildings serve as the private homes of Coatlinchan's wealthier families. These were built looking out to the *monte*, the hillside made up of communal lands and forests that rises toward the Iztaccihuatl and Mount Tlaloc volcanoes, now only discernible on less polluted days.

Strikingly, the first visible traces of the absent stone that I noticed were related to intra-urban transportation infrastructures: a smiling cartoon proudly giving a thumbs-up to a neon sign that read "Coatlinchan" on the windshields of the local combi route, and a little sticker, often crookedly placed, on taxi doors. As I wandered around, I began to see more traces of the absent stone: a bakery and a stationery store named "Tlaloc" and several murals featuring the standing stone painted on old adobe walls. I would later find many more signs, images, and murals depicting the stone as well as myriad replicas and miniatures, both inside people's homes and adorning their gardens and patios. But back in 2005, what caught my attention was how the stone's absence was palpable in town residents' lives and stories, stirring memories, powerful emotions, heated arguments, and much uncertainty and ambivalence regarding its identification, local significance, and how and why it was no longer in Coatlinchan.

On this early visit, I stopped to order a snack at a carnitas stall, where the attendant asked what brought me to town. I said I had heard that "the Tlaloc" (as I then knew the stone) was from here and that I was curious to visit its place of origin. The attendant responded with a complicit chuckle: "Ha! I knew someone would come asking about the Piedra! Just yesterday there was an earthquake. . . . It always shakes when people come asking about her. . . . You know, it isn't Tlaloc, it's Tlala! Tlaloc's partner. It's a goddess, not a god!" A man eating at the stall with his family chimed in:

> Tlala? Nobody here calls it that! Not even Tlaloc. Here we know it as La Piedra . . . La Piedra de los Tecomates. Ever since the Piedra was taken, it barely rains. . . . It used to rain nice and hard, the earth was good; now all that remains is dust. It sure rains in Mexico City, though. Floods there all the time . . . and that's because that's where they took our stone. People used to come here from all over the place to see it and to buy *ídolos* [clay figurines], but now Coatlinchan is no longer on the map. Nobody comes here anymore.

I was admiring the man's elegant cowboy boots and *norteño*-style hat when the attendant again interceded: "Everyone knows that the thing they put in Mexico City isn't even the real one. It's a dummy! The real one was shipped off by the government to the land where nobody sleeps . . . where nothing is wasted. It's in Japan!"

An older woman wearing an embroidered apron with a bag of groceries by her side interrupted: "Come on! It's not in Japan! The real one, THE Tlaloc, is up in the monte. My grandfather told me he saw it there. He had a map that showed where it was. The one they took isn't Tlaloc; it's his partner." She then

lamented that the stone's removal had brought about many losses for the town: "Since they took the Piedra away, it's been downhill. You know, this town is a mess. Everyone talks about how the government took the Piedra, and that they took the Piedra, and took the Piedra . . . but there isn't any type of solidarity—that is the real reason we lost the Piedra in the first place, and why we are losing everything: our land, our water, what is ours [*lo nuestro*], our town."

Attracted by the fiery conversation, several elderly men hanging out within earshot left their spots under the shade to share their own versions of events, telling me there had been a rebellion when the government first attempted to remove the stone and an ensuing military siege. The oldest man in the crowd raised his voice. Leaning on his walking stick, held in hands calloused by a lifetime of manual work, and removing his straw hat, revealing a white head of perfectly combed hair, he pronounced: "The town authorities sold it to the government—that's what really happened. They took money and negotiated everything. There was never a town assembly, we were never consulted. . . . We've got to tell it like it is! It wasn't the government that took it away. The truth is it was our own authorities. And that is why things are as they are now. They are all corrupt, they are like the government, they steal from the town, from all of us. Vultures! We are guilty of our own fate." The conversation quickly shifted to the town's contemporary ills, framed as both cause and effect of the stone's extraction.

Many of the stories I heard that day were not mentioned again during my following visits or even once I moved to Coatlinchan three years later, nor over the course of the past two decades that I have been visiting my friends there.[13] I even tried to elicit their retelling with no success for the documentary film *The Absent Stone* (2013), which I codirected with Jesse Lerner, filmmaker and scholar of the modern reworkings of all things Mesoamerican, in tandem with the ethnographic fieldwork on which this book is based.[14] Although town residents many times insisted that the "real" Tlaloc was up in the monte, only one other person ever discussed the map that led to it, and the name Tlala and the story about Japan never came up again. However, the phrase "desde que se llevaron La Piedra" (since The Stone was taken away) kept coming up over and over again in conversations. Town residents clearly marked this moment as a tipping point. There was a before and an after of the stone's removal. Even as the phrase conceals the identity of the perpetrators by using the passive voice, it conveys town residents' sense of dispossession, denouncing the stone's removal as a theft, contrasting with the triumphant narrative promoted by the Mexican government and the museum. In Coatlinchan, the stone's absence presses upon the present. In addition to the visible marks left in the town's contemporary

landscape and built environment, the stone's absence affects climate and makes the earth shake at its mention. It also generates copies and replicas and even produces other stone carvings, ancient artifacts, and treasure troves that the stone is associated with. Meanwhile, town residents have creatively reworked its absence into their daily lives and environments through a variety of practices that began to reveal themselves as I spent time there and that are the subjects of this book.

Naming the Stone

Over time, the stone has amassed many names, each containing assumptions about where and to whom it belongs, and where and to whom it does not. It is sometimes described through its material and physical attributes as a "monolith": a single, and also separate, block of rock. It is also referred to as a "statue" or a "sculpture," referencing the human interventions that shaped its matter into recognizable form, or as a "monument," alluding to its enormous dimensions and assumed purpose as an upright architectural feature. It has also borne the names of what it has been thought to represent: an "idol" in viceregal times, or a specific deity associated with water in the Mesoamerican pantheon, such as Tlaloc, or Tlaloc's female counterpart Chalchiuhtlicue, in the modern era. Most of these names were given by outsiders as they sought to engage, study, describe, and make sense of its shape, features, and location: archaeologists, collectors, government officials, engineers, and curious travelers, all captivated by its enigmatic history. Its unique proportions and its relative isolation in Coatlinchan, far from other pre-Hispanic structures and ceremonial complexes, sparked much interest and speculation.

For the residents of Coatlinchan, my main interlocutors and teachers, who sometimes refer to the stone affectionately as El Tlaloc or La Chalchi, the stone is mostly known as La Piedra (The Stone) or La Piedra de los Tecomates, after the Nahuatl term *tecomatl*, which translates as "vessel" or "orifice."[15] This name alludes both to its material and to the carving's most salient formal features: two rows of six aligning round cavities, or *tecomates*, sometimes described as the stone's "mouth" or "teeth." Town residents also use humor, referencing the stone's formal resemblance to figures drawn from comic books and popular animations, calling it El Mono or Monigote (terms used for dolls), King Kong, or even SpongeBob SquarePants.

It took me time to understand the theoretical valence of these names beyond their material and formal designations. Their proliferation points to the difficulties of fully encompassing why the stone matters to people in Coatlinchan in language. At the same time, they show that town residents are deploying

humor to both make sense of and contest its theft. Naming the stone remains challenging. One of the central arguments of this book is that this is because it is not separate from the place and people with which it coexisted and which it continues to be related to and affect even after its relocation. The stone's ungraspability in a name is symptomatic of the complexity of the relations in which it is embedded and entangled and in which it continues to actively participate. I decided to use La Piedra throughout the book, not to settle on a single name but because this is the way town residents mostly call it. I have also learned that in calling it a "stone," they resist understanding it as a solidification of something else. For them, it is not a representation of a powerful being, an ancient deity to be revered and feared, or an ancestor with vital qualities and agentive capabilities—or at least not only. It is a stone because it is made from, part of, and constitutive of the material elements but also the geologic and environmental forces and human and nonhuman bodies that make up territory and guarantee its reproduction.

As scholars across fields and disciplines have shown, stone, despite its hardness, solidity, and alleged permanence, is also energetic and generative of relations, calling into question strict boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, the solid and the fluid, the organic and the inorganic.[16] Stone's geological qualities are in fact changing, made up of ruptures and discontinuities—unconformities—that complicate its association with fixity, wholeness, and endurance.[17] In Coatlinchan, beyond its geological characteristics, La Piedra is related and connected to people and place in ways that cannot easily be broken, even if the stone itself was physically moved, stolen, or repurposed.[18] Despite its physical absence, then, and perhaps even through the force of this absence, the stone from Coatlinchan continues to be inextricably bound to and related to the territory it was made in and from, and where it retains presence and the possibility for action.

Aftershocks

Those who witnessed the stone's arrival in Mexico City in 1964 describe the earth reverberating under their feet as the low-bed's enormous weight passed by, comparing the sensation to the region's frequent earthquakes. The following day, *El Día*, a popular Mexico City newspaper, published a cartoon showing the arriving convoy buried in mud with a little rain cloud hovering above (figure I.4). The image was accompanied by the following commentary: "Soon the crowd congregated, mesmerized by Tlaloc's passage in the midst of a downpour that fell so symbolically upon the deity. The cries of 'Bravo! Long

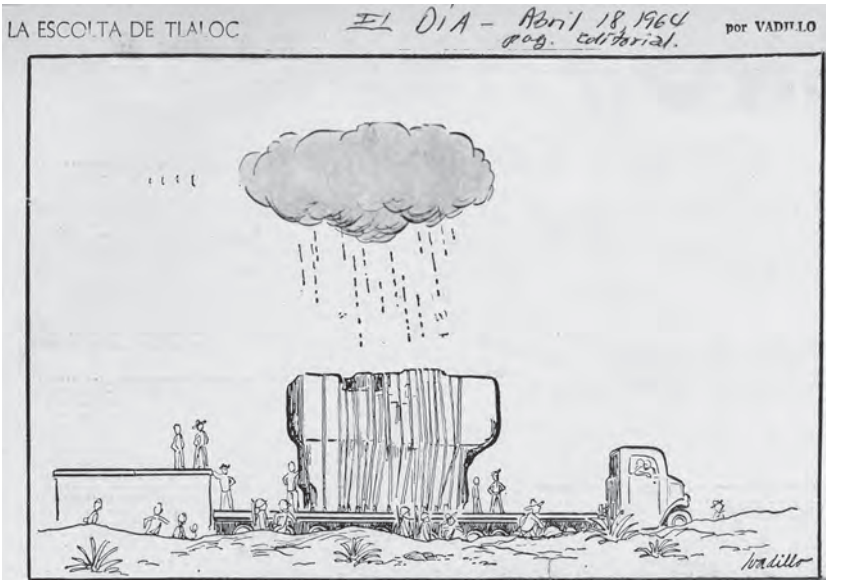

FIGURE 1.4. Leonardo Vadillo, "La escolta de Tlaloc" (Tlaloc's escort), *El Día*, April 18, 1964.

live Tlaloc!' on young people's lips as they clambered up buildings and public monuments made the anthropologist Luis Aveleyra, who was involved in its transfer, exclaim: 'This is the Mexican's telluric character!'" Aveleyra (1926–2001), an archaeologist professionally trained to excavate the ground, and also the previous museum's director, was then in charge of coordinating the new museum's collections.[19] His exclamation as well as witnesses' sensory memories can be read as more than momentary hyperboles.

In Spanish, as in other romance languages, *telluric*, from the Latin *tellus*, is translated interchangeably as "earth," "soil," "ground," "floor," "land," "place," and "country," as if these terms were synonyms. But what if *the telluric* were understood as bundling these concepts together? Such a combination would involve connecting what is above and below the earth's surface, linking the substances, bodies, and networks that bind earth (ground, floor, land) to the materials that it contains (soil, organic matter, but also water) and to that which it produces (plants and trees but also human and nonhuman beings), as well as more abstract concepts describing human attachments to the earth, like "place," "territory," and "country."[20]

In ancient cosmologies, Tlaloc, a telluric entity, embodies such a bundling. In Nahuatl, the name for the deity, and for its most important ceremonial site, the mountainous region known as Tlallocan, located in the same mountain range

and very near Coatlinchan, translates as "of the earth" or "covered by earth." The deity associated with water and rain, thunder and lightning, was also venerated on mountaintops and volcanic craters as well as inside underground caves and sinkholes. Tlaloc, in fact, was thought to control precipitation as well as the forces emanating from the Earth's core that provoke earthquakes. In this way, Tlaloc embodies the connections between the ground and what lies above and under it: climate and atmosphere as well as water flows and telluric forces, enabling or hindering human and nonhuman survival on its surface.

In Nahuatl-speaking Mesoamerica, the term *altepetl*, which has been translated as "territory" or "settlement," also describes how the telluric binds people, places, and the environment.[21] Made up of *atl* (water) and *tepetl* (mountain), the concept very literally brings together specific sites located in landscapes and the people who live off, inhabit, and cultivate these landscapes, as well as the environmental forces that make them thrive. Accordingly, the altepetl glyph in sixteenth-century codices is represented by a topographical feature, a mountain from which underground streams emerge, with the toponym of a specific town or people hovering above. This representation makes visible the connections between communities and the earthly configurations they inhabit and sow as well as the above- and belowground dimensions of those configurations. The concept of the altepetl has important political implications because it holds these elements—people and the environments they live on and from—together as the core of sovereignty. In this guise, it has been taken up by contemporary Nahua thinkers and activists for a politics that challenges corporate and state-sponsored forms of extractivism threatening present-day communities and their territories (Quintero Wier 2020).[22]

In order to underscore these relations, and following these Nahua activists and thinkers' lead (rather than an essentialist, timeless, or ontological argument), I frame the stone's relocation from Coatlinchan, an ancient altepetl as well as a contemporary town, as a telluric phenomenon. This is also why I have come to think of its enduring effects and affectations as "aftershocks," a term used mostly in the earth sciences, especially seismology, to describe the lasting and lingering vibrations that follow earthquakes after the actual seismic event.[23] Mexico, and particularly the central valleys where both Coatlinchan and Mexico City are located, is an area known for frequent earthquakes that make human and deep time coincide and collide in recurrent and palpable ways (Denizen 2018, 2019; Reddy 2023; Summers 2023, 2025). Built on a former lake bed, the Valley of Mexico is not only prone to telluric movements caused by the tectonic fault lines that crisscross the earth's core underground. It is also subject to a very particular phenomenon linked to the consistency of its ground and to its historical

relationship to water. Its soft and moist soils, made up of lake sediments, absorb the Earth's movements, projecting and reproducing the resonances of seismic waves beyond actual quakes (Cinna Lomnitz 1988, 1990; Cinna Lomnitz and Castaños 2006). Seismologists suggestively describe this phenomenon for lay audiences as a "jello effect" (Cruz Atienza, Singh, and Ordaz 2017).

In Spanish, the word for these reverberations is *réplica*, denoting a kind of turbulence that lingers and amplifies, repeats and replicates, well after a telluric phenomenon occurs. *Réplica* comes from the Latin *replicare*, combining the prefix *re-* (back, again, or anew) with *plicare* (to fold), and translated as "folding back," "folding over," or "bending back." In seismology, *réplica* describes the folding over of the earth that reverberates in ways that make a telluric event ripple, even if steadily decreasing in intensity and frequency according to a consistent pattern. Réplicas in their telluric form, then, recall but also reproduce and repeat the effects of a seismic event.

Thinking of the effects of the stone's relocation as aftershocks is particularly insightful given the multiple meanings of its Spanish equivalent. Like the word in English, *réplica* is also used to designate copies that duplicate matter through iteration, folding back the singular and the original by opening it up, allowing for multiplication and ultimately, perhaps, for substitution or replacement. Even as replicas reproduce what was there before, to replicate is also always generative. Replicas unsettle processes of reproduction because they are both the same and different at the same time, producing something new even if the result looks and maybe feels exactly the same as an original.

The term *réplica* has a third meaning in Spanish, associated with the power of language to "fold back" and "make anew" through the act of answering back. Its verb form *replicar* means "to protest." It can, then, also involve replacing by contesting, refuting, or refusing. In Coatlinchan, replicas of the stone in all shapes, materials, and sizes, but also of the event of loss and dispossession itself, continue to produce rumblings that extend aftershocks into the present. These replicas are continually reclaiming and reproducing the stone as well as responding to, even contesting, its theft by the Mexican state. Replication often takes on the form of humor as a politics of contestation, calling attention to how humor and parody can be deployed as alternative aesthetics to unsettle and subvert the status quo and stand against power (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Trnka 2011; Bernal 2013; Boyer 2013; Goldstein 2013; Haugerud 2013; Petrović 2018; Rehak and Trnka 2019). Humor in Coatlinchan is a politics in itself that speaks back to power (Marcus 1988; Bakhtin 2010), counteracting, responding to, and refuting state theft.

The stone's aftershocks, its réplicas in Coatlinchan and beyond, also reveal territory to be composed of copresences, interactions, and attachments that tie and intertwine humans and nonhumans to the *tellus*, the "earthly," as well as to the elements, substances, and forces that sustain it. Although territory tends to be understood as a portion of land under the jurisdiction of a political agency (Brighenti 2006; Foucault 2007), ethnography has proven a rich instrument to unsettle and enrich this definition, showing how territory can sometimes not easily be located in a single place or how various territories can overlap, layered onto one another, coexisting simultaneously, "elastically" altering surfaces and creating relations (Verdery 1994, 2003). Territory can, for example, be constituted through temporally and spatially discontinuous pathways that link places to the deep histories of the people who inhabit and sustain them over time (Abercrombie 1998). It can contain and hold memories of habitation and affect as well as material vestiges that persist well after forced displacement (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Richard 2018). It can be reconstituted through emergent surfaces built to traverse terrains even if transit is forbidden (Kernaghan 2022a) or renew landscapes when remaining in place becomes threatening and dangerous (Khayyat 2022). Territory, in other words, depends on the three-dimensional materiality of the ground that makes places into lived terrain, transformed through human experience, action, and perception (Gordillo 2018, 2020, 2021). Given this complexity, territory is not necessarily synonymous with the acts of demarcation and boundary drawing prevailing in many conceptualizations, including those of the state itself.

In some cases, as in Coatlinchan, territory exists and is in fact reproduced elsewhere than, or in ways no longer recognizable, on the surface. Coatlinchan's residents have lived off their land for generations, growing maize and other subsistence crops, or gathering firewood and other resources from the community's hills and forests.[24] Their social and ritual lives have been organized around agricultural cycles and festivities that in turn structure the calendar year. The stone was intricately connected to these cycles, rooted in and constitutive of the substances and relationships that make up and sustain the town both above- and belowground. These substances—land, water, crops, plants, but also ancient artifacts—have historically been coveted by outsiders, including the Mexican state and its representatives. Town residents equate the stone's removal with both these entrenched forms of extractivism and more recent examples of dispossession. At the same time, they continue to experience the aftershocks of what has been taken from their territory in ambivalent ways: even as they mourn their loss, they also contest dispossession through its generative

effects and multiple forms of replication. Like scars, the enduring effects of repeated thefts are often painful, but the absence of stolen things also produces new capacities for healing, survival, and regeneration. Even when forcefully taken, these things cannot be fully detached from territory, nor from the networks of relations that secure its existence. In Coatlinchan, the absent stone is absent and present at the same time, bound and related to the ground, even if far away. Its theft might have hindered, but did not break, its relations.

The Grass of a Lake

Shortly before his death, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez (1919–2013), the architect commissioned by President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–64) and Jaime Torres Bodet (1902–74), then secretary of education, to design and build the Museo Nacional de Antropología, described the stone's relocation as one of the most important achievements of his career as well as of modern Mexican history (Ramírez Vázquez 2008).[25] The architect celebrated its transportation from Coatlinchan to Mexico City as an engineering marvel as well as a salvage operation that rescued an object of national *patrimonio* belonging to the Mexican people as a whole and to the institutions charged with caring for and preserving their heritage.

Mexico is one of the countries in the world, along with perhaps Greece, Egypt, and Israel, where ancient things have held a central place in modern nation making.[26] Premised on the ideology of *mestizaje*, making ancient Indigenous artifacts excavated underground into the nation's patrimony became central to the Mexican postrevolutionary state's technologies of national reconciliation and territorial consolidation following decades of political fragmentation and turmoil.[27] Although this process began with late nineteenth-century collecting practices that justified the extraction of ancient monuments and their relocation to the nation's capital and to the Museo Nacional to prevent their looting and export (Bueno 2010, 2016; Garrigan 2012; Achim 2017), it gained its force from the 1917 Constitution, which bundled subsoil resources, like oil, mineral ores, and water, with ancient artifacts into a single law rendering these inalienable as state property.[28] This law, Article 27, regulates patrimonio as the nation's inalienable possessions as well as its telluric foundations and roots, located literally inside and under the country's ground (Cottom 2008; Azuela 2011, 2019).[29]

In Spanish, *patrimonio*, a term related to kinship, is used in Mexican state discourses and laws in ways that condense its common English equivalents, "patrimony," "heritage" and "inheritance," while also indexing patriarchal power relations and forms of sovereignty.[30] The concept of patrimonio implies the *patria*, or fatherland, binding people to territory and to one another while

also giving the Mexican state authority and political control over them (Claudio Lomnitz 2001).[31] Such patriarchal claims exceed legal definitions when it comes to the pre-Hispanic, making this time period and its material vestiges the nation's origin and core, its "soul" (López Hernández 2018). Through laws and practices of patrimonio, therefore, the state regulates and controls how and who can excavate and study (Vázquez León 2003; Holley-Kline 2025), restore and conserve (Salas Landa 2018, 2024a), and, more importantly, own and keep such objects and sites, always under the vigilance of state-sanctioned experts, national museums, and institutions assumed to be their proper caretakers (Achim, Deans-Smith, and Rozental 2021).[32] The state has used the power it derives from patriarchal conceptions of care to cordon off, relocate, and control these objects and sites, sometimes resorting to violence in the name of their preservation.

Yet patrimonio laws also connect ancient artifacts to other substances and materials related to enduring forms of sovereignty that exist parallel to that of the nation-state (Ferry 2005).[33] Patrimonio is in fact mired in ambivalence because, even as the concept and its laws imply the power of the state over certain objects and substances, they assume that these simultaneously belong to and constitute everyone that makes up the national community but no one person, people, or community specifically (Breglia 2006). Article 27 is in fact the same law that maintains, even if it does not fully recognize, forms of inalienable property and distributed sovereignty that are also connected to territory, preserving corporate bodies such as landed communities known as ejidos (Claudio Lomnitz 2001).[34] But for the residents of Coatlinchan, and I suspect for many communities like it, territory exceeds landed property, even communally administered land, as a form of relating to the ground that they inhabit and thrive on, including the objects and substances that lie underneath that ground and that might be extracted from it. Hence, even as artifacts from the pre-Hispanic past are legally owned, administered, and managed by the Mexican state and its official heritage institutions, they also exist as sites that contain and sustain communities' own forms of sovereignty and the stuff that allows for their endurance and reproduction in specific places.

Nevertheless, patrimonio as a legal regime and state praxis continues to be premised on an artificial divide between objects and the places, communities, and environments they are located in, reproducing an assumed nature/culture binary (Rozental 2017b). In Coatlinchan, as in other contemporary communities in Mexico coexisting with vestiges of the pre-Hispanic past, ancient artifacts operate within multiple and dynamic arrangements that resonate more with how feminist scholars have imagined human and nonhuman relationality (Strathern 2005), forms of "intra-action" and "the mutual constitution of entangled

agencies" (Barad 2007, 33). These challenge patrimonio's patriarchal tenets by focusing attention on conceptions of care based on interconnection and mutuality. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2005) insists on thinking through an "ecology of practices" to underscore the ways in which humans and nonhumans are intertwined in ways that make them indissociable from the world around them. By focusing on how patrimonio could be part of such an ecology, we might extend what Marshall Sahlins (2011, 2) discusses as the "mutuality of being" that defines kinship to nonhumans that exist as "earth beings" capable of political action (Myers 2001; Cadena 2015, 2018; Povinelli 2016) or to telluric entities that, like the Coatlinchan stone, are inextricable from and generative of the earth, people, and environments in and with which they coexist.[35] Removing them from territory, even if for the purpose of their conservation, encapsulates them as bounded things, limiting their participation in such networks. At the same time, their removal and displacement stimulate new attachments, relations, and replications.

Despite its generative aftershocks, the legal extrication of patrimonio that justified the stone's removal from Coatlinchan ignores the ways that objects, sites, and, of course, people are embedded in each other's existence. It also allows the Mexican state to violate, deny, and even criminalize local claims, property rights, and other kinds of affective, political, and even ecological attachments to ancient things on the part of the people and communities that coexist with them. Engaging ancient vestiges outside this nature/culture divide resonates with how people and communities like the residents of Coatlinchan experience them: as connected to and enabling not only social reproduction but that of bodies and territories, and of the organic and telluric forces that—like rain and soil—guarantee survival.

In publications as well as during numerous public appearances and interviews, and during my own conversations with him, Ramírez Vázquez underscored that the stone's extraction was negotiated with and accepted by Coatlinchan's residents, who understood and supported, even celebrated, its national significance and place as national patrimonio in the museum. He highlighted the festive spirit of the event: "Yes, it became a party. In Mexico, we make everything a party!"[36] The architect, who kept a vast archive of documents related to all his projects, forbade the reproduction of photographs showing soldiers in Coatlinchan and insisted that the stone was not removed by force. Instead, he highlighted that, at the time, it was crucial for him, but especially for President López Mateos, who was then finishing his term in office, for town residents to agree and support its relocation. Ramírez Vázquez told the same anecdote many times: on his request, town representatives called an

assembly during which he explained the importance of the museum and the pride town residents would experience at having their ancestors' contribution featured there. After his speech, a local teacher intervened to defuse villagers' opposition. The architect referred to this teacher as a "maestro Nahua," indigenizing his identity. In his recollection of the event, the teacher said: "Look, muchachos, the stone is like the grass of a lake: the grass at the edge and at the center of the lake is all grass from the same lake" (Ramírez Vázquez 2008, 67). Ramírez Vázquez used the word *laguna*, referring to bodies of water that, like the ancient lake of Texcoco, were shallow wetlands, seasonally fluctuating and making clear borders separating its waters from its banks difficult to discern. Following what the architect described as a "common Nahuatl formula," the nation was metaphorically rendered a single body with no clear boundaries and with homogeneous and generic, therefore interchangeable, vegetation.

Metaphors, especially when state power is naturalized as a biological phenomenon like grass growing in a lake, are deeply political.[37] According to the architect, the teacher had convinced his peers that "everything was Mexico" (Ramírez Vázquez 2008, 67) and, therefore, their stone—the equivalent to grass on the edge of the lake—belonged to the center in Mexico City. By setting this in Nahua cosmologies, he further naturalized the nation and the state's claim on ancient artifacts for its museum. The parable made the legal regime of patrimonio, inherited from colonial laws and developed in the nineteenth century to consolidate the newly independent nation, into an Indigenous category.

Over the past three decades, many of the academic literatures on heritage worldwide, and on archaeological heritage specifically, have focused on the uses of ancient things and sites with clear political agendas (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Abu El-Haj 2001; Meskell 2008).[38] In Latin American contexts, and in Mexico specifically, community museums have become sites where patrimonio has been reconfigured in ways that creatively adapt idioms of museum display to local narratives and needs (Camarena and Morales 2006; Hoobler 2006; Rufer 2014, 2017).[39] Yet, in these museums, artifacts and monuments considered patrimonio continue to be understood as separate objects, existing as distinct and bounded things that might be connected to people and communities because they are key to fostering and extending kinship but not actual participants in the production and reproduction of the necessary conditions of a community's existence. By confining objects to museum spaces, even those that are situated, curated, and administered locally, these projects continue to separate things from the environments and the people that sustain them, maintaining the preservationist logic of state patrimonio that conceives of objects' care as conservation and not connection.

To Rob a Thief

I now turn to another metaphor drawn from the natural world that serves to rethink how we might understand communities' ties to ancient things claimed by the Mexican state as national patrimonio. People born and living in Coatlinchan are known as Tlacuaches, after the small marsupial endemic to the Americas. The animal has many surprising abilities: it is immune to certain predators' venom and can deceive others by playing dead in moments of danger. The *tlacuache* is also key to maintaining ecosystems, fertilizing soils, and helping distribute seeds. Nevertheless, its nocturnal habits as well as its parasitic penchants for occupying ready-made burrows and stealing food from other animals, including humans, have given it a bad reputation. The animal's rapacious behavior is premised on its unique physiognomy. Its pouch, but also its hands and feet with opposable thumbs (the only non-primate with this feature), are what allow it to scavenge and survive. According to Mesoamerican myths and stories, this physiognomy is the direct result of its thieving but also of its cunning and adaptive abilities: its characteristic prehensile, albeit hairless, tail is thought to have been scorched when it snuck down to the underworld to steal fire from the gods and share it with humans (López Austin 1996). In myth as well as in evolutionary paradigms, tlacuaches, then, have not only endured cataclysm and threatening circumstances; they have been scarred, marked, and transformed by their work to better human existence, proving that they are fundamentally interspecies collaborators as well as creative survivors.

Whereas other towns in the region proudly bear nicknames associating their residents with charismatic creatures or with skills in specialized crafts, Coatlinchan's moniker has historically associated its residents with the animal's negative qualities: theft and deception.[40] Town residents themselves complain about the animals, who notoriously steal eggs from chicken coops or the sweet *agua miel* from magueys before the liquid can be fermented to make pulque. They also joke about tlacuaches' gusto for the beverage, building up their own reputation as festive but also overindulgent drunks. Ultimately, town residents wear the nickname with a combination of humor and reservation, sometimes referring to it with pride when discussing their ability to get away with something but also with defensiveness, hoping to dispel rumors that the moniker's origin lies in town residents' own rapaciousness, or at best living parasitically off the backs of others. They emphasize that the creature's positive qualities—its abilities and dexterity—outweigh the negative: in ancient codices, tlacuache warriors are shown as trusted keepers of knowledge and territory.[41]

And yet theft and what anthropologists describe as negative reciprocity (Sahlins 1963, 1972) do not always, or not only, have negative effects. Emphasizing the negative valence of a relationship often obscures its generativity, even in its destructiveness. Theft also works to create relations, building ties that bind and connect people and communities. Sometimes, theft sustains webs of domination and subservience within power structures that exist parallel to and in collaboration with the state (Claudio Lomnitz 2005; B. Grant 2009), and sometimes theft might even foster local forms of collaboration and solidarity that resist and speak back to the state and its own modes of institutionalized violence (Poole 1987). In documenting Coatlinchan's residents' relationships to ancient things and other materials and substances taken from their territory, this book contributes to showing Tlacuaches to have been creative survivors of theft rather than its instigators or passive victims. And this theft, committed by the Mexican state and justified through legal registers and state practices of patrimonio, was premised on a questionable distinction between nature and culture, and between people, objects, and environments with which they coexist. The state's exercise of patrimonio politics and its alleged salvage of the stone was in fact based on a fundamental misrecognition of theft. Denouncing the stone's removal as state theft also shows the generative effects of this action and the relations that came into being in the wake of dispossession.

Saqueo, derived from the Latin *saccus*, is used colloquially in Mexican Spanish to refer to any act of looting, taking, or collecting ancient things that is not undertaken by the state, its heritage institutions, or sanctioned experts.[42] In this sense, as stipulated by patrimonio laws and practices, any form of owning, relating to, coexisting with, keeping, or taking ancient objects outside of institutional contexts is criminalized as illicit theft. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History), constituted in 1939 to care for and administer national monuments and sites under the rubric of patrimonio, is charged with sanctioning individuals and communities who do not turn objects over to the state. This same logic criminalizes those who replicate patrimonio without official institutions' permission, even if these replicas, "monos" (Zepeda 2000) or "original interpretations" (Lerner 2001), are not necessarily made to deceive, nor to be sold as forgeries (Pasztory 2002; Brulotte 2012).[43]

The INAH recently ran a campaign to familiarize the public with how to handle patrimonio that exemplifies how criminalizing saqueo as theft is central to its mandate. Using the heading "What do I do if I find archaeological pieces?" (this term is used in the museum and art world assuming such objects as separate and valuable collectibles), the infographic offered bullet-point

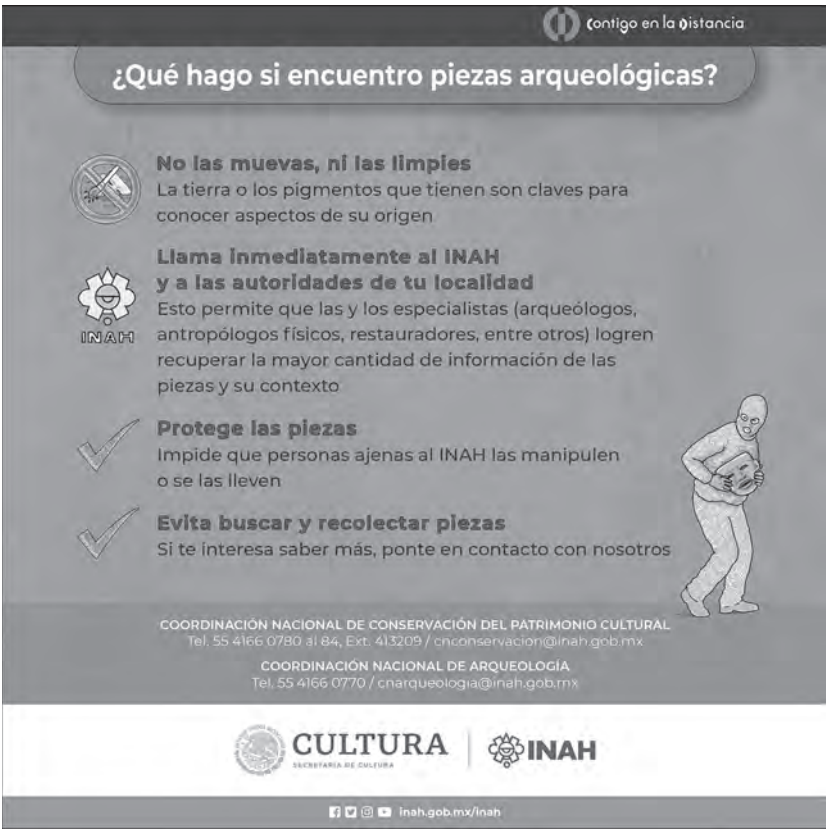

FIGURE I.5. "¿Qué hago si encuentro piezas arqueológicas?" (What do I do if I find archaeological pieces?). Infographic published by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2023.

instructions alongside an illustration of a person fully masked like a bank robber and carrying off an iconic Teotihuacan mask similar to those in the Museo Nacional de Antropología's collections (figure I.5):

1. Do not move or clean them: dirt or pigments on them are essential to knowing aspects of their origin.
2. Immediately call the INAH and local authorities: experts (archaeologists, anthropologists, professional conservators, and others) succeed in recovering the greatest information about the pieces and their contexts.
3. Protect the pieces: stop anyone that is not from the INAH from manipulating or taking them.

4 Avoid looking for and collecting pieces: If you are interested in knowing more, contact us.

On Christmas Eve 1985, the Museo Nacional de Antropología was itself famously the subject of theft, a few months after a massive earthquake shook the country.[44] And looting has been documented all over Mexico, where there is a thriving black market for ancient things commercialized as valuable artworks.[45] According to patrimonio laws, as can be seen in the INAH's recent campaign, these forms of theft and other kinds of manipulation or attachment to ancient artifacts are equally criminalized as saqueo. The ways in which people in Coatlinchan and other places understand and experience these objects and their permanence as constitutive of community and territory, as well as their efforts to replicate things that have been stolen from it, call this logic into question. In fact, these approaches reverse the relationship between the licit and the illicit as well as between theft's victims and its perpetrators.

In other parts of the world, cases of forced dispossession like Coatlinchan's have been denounced as theft linked to colonial violence, inspiring Indigenous communities, First Nations, and former colonies to file legal demands for restitution and repatriation.[46] Legal frameworks for repatriation have been critiqued as partial and incomplete means to translate cultural claims over artifacts and human remains (Brown 2003, 2004; Rowlands 2004), yet, as many have suggested, they have served both in practice and in context for communities and postcolonial nation-states to reclaim sovereignty over things and foster cultural renewal in the wake of dispossession (Coombe 1998; Barkan and Bush 2002; Fine-Dare 2002; Peers 2017; Fforde et al. 2023).

In Mexico, national legislation does not formally recognize separate sovereignties, Indigenous or otherwise, that could legally claim substances, objects, or monuments defined as national patrimonio, making legal claims and demands for return by any individual or local community untenable. Objects made before the arrival of Spanish colonizers continue, then, to be legally construed as being out of place and illegally held anywhere, or by anyone, that is not a state-run and sanctioned heritage institution. To return to Ramírez Vázquez's phrasing, patrimonio laws and practices assume that the objects and sites that it encompasses are the indistinguishable and, therefore, interchangeable grass of a national lake. And yet, as I hope this book shows, precisely because of how such objects are connected to humans and nonhumans who inhabit and constitute specific territories, their severance is always partial and incomplete. Their absence leaves vibrant traces and powerful aftershocks. Even as the stone was taken away and repurposed as a monument miles away,

it continues to be present in Coatlinchan. Its theft did not thwart its ability to remain connected, participating in networks and associations that sustain the place, people, and territory where it once lay. At the same time, its removal continues to produce replicas: new objects, actors, and relations that allow the stone to multiply, contesting its theft as it also shapes myriad relations both above- and underground.

Structure of the Book

The chapters that follow are structured around the story of the stone: first as it was made into a separate object from the place where it was found and then as it lingers, multiplies, and reproduces in Coatlinchan despite—and also because of—its absence. Part I, "The State of Patrimonio," relies on archival sources as well as interviews with key participants who orchestrated and lived through the stone's relocation to show how scholarship, legal regimes, engineering, and finally state theft participated in severing it from the territory where it was found.

Chapter 1, "A Curious Thing," focuses on how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars used scientific methods and arguments to make sense of the stone in relation to the ravine where it was found. They hoped to solve what they understood as an inherent contradiction: why was the largest ancient stone effigy found to date in the Americas lying in what they considered an isolated and insignificant place? Their interpretations of the stone's features, material qualities, possible identification, and gender ultimately served to prove that the site was arbitrary and thus unrelated to its makers' intentions and ancient uses. Their work consolidated the stone as a self-contained and therefore potentially portable monument, long before it was physically removed.

Chapter 2, "Engineering Transfer," uses interviews, published accounts, media, and archival sources to analyze the role that technology and engineering played in actually moving the stone and repurposing it as a standing monument for the Museo Nacional de Antropología in the 1960s. These efforts were very much in line with a developmentalist national state project that imagined public works and state-of-the-art infrastructure as a continuation of an ancient civilization's quest to control the environment—specifically water.

Chapter 3, "Theft," places archival sources and ethnographic fieldwork in Coatlinchan in conversation to trace the tensions and negotiations between state agents claiming to "rescue" the stone as national patrimonio and town residents who sabotaged their efforts, trying unsuccessfully to stop its relocation.

These tensions show how the stone was rooted in what town residents consider "lo nuestro" (what is ours), a telluric concept used to describe the stuff that makes up community and grounds it in a specific place.

Part II, "Aftershocks," analyzes the ways in which, after more than six decades, the stone's absence continues to vibrantly mark and affect Coatlinchan's present. Based on over twenty years of continued ethnographic fieldwork, these chapters problematize the distinction between objects, communities, and the places and environments they are embedded in, showing how the stone and other vestiges from the ancient past are constitutive of relations that produce and reproduce territory over time.

Chapter 4, "Scars," looks at the visible marks and material traces that emerged in the stone's wake, especially in the ravine that once contained it. As "aftershocks," these traces replicate and amplify the stone's absence, acting on and affecting town residents' daily life and experiences. These scars mark Coatlinchan's landscape in tangible ways as they also bind town residents to each other and to territory. They serve as both painful reminders of past violence and temporally open-ended processes of reproduction, regeneration, and healing.

Chapter 5, "Treasure," explores how the absent stone is entangled with other substances and objects such as gold, sand, water, and other ancient artifacts that town residents consider "lo nuestro." Once bountiful and self-replenishing, treasure remains fragile, hidden in Coatlinchan, continuously under threat of extraction and appropriation. Understanding ancient things, including the stone, as treasure complicates state discourses that focus on the material qualities of such objects as separate, authentic, and singular vestiges from the past that require isolation, protection, and intervention to ensure their care and conservation. As treasure, these things remain embedded in territory, guarded by humans and more-than-humans, as they generate wealth, abundance, and well-being and continue to sustain and replicate the community and the territory on which it thrives.

Chapter 6, "Replicas," explores how the stone's physical removal allowed it to multiply, producing reproductions and miniatures of different shapes, materials, and sizes. These replicas resonate with how processes of replication, iteration, and itinerancy—namely of saint images—have historically been involved in the production of territory in Mexican and other Latin American contexts.[47] By paying attention to how replicas work—their materiality and scale, what exactly they reproduce, as well as the humor with which they are arranged and moved across space and time—this chapter shows how the stone continues to generate new objects and networks of relations amid the residents of a community known for its loss.

Chapter 7, "Watershed," analyzes how Coatlinchan's residents experience the stone's removal as both cause and effect of drought and environmental disruptions like climate change. Their understanding frames the stone and other objects claimed as patrimonio as central to telluric processes that guarantee rainfall and access to water and therefore life on Earth and in the specific place they inhabit. Through their own collecting practices, Tlacuaches are responding to state theft and working to restore a damaged ecology. In this way, they challenge legal regimes and state practices that justified the stone's extraction from Coatlinchan and reframe it as a site of connection, care, and renewal.

The conclusion discusses town residents' recent efforts to return the stone to Coatlinchan, situating their work within a worldwide movement to return museum collections to source communities and appropriate or remove statues and monuments that embody and perpetuate violent histories. In conversation with these actions and debates, as well as with recent Mexican feminist activism, their call for restitution invites a politics of patrimonio that takes into account how certain objects and sites cannot be separated from the places and communities they are embedded in and constitutive of. Theirs is not only an effort to right a historical wrong. Ultimately, their call for the stone's return is premised on the ways in which it remains connected to and interacts with telluric forces crucial to their town and the region's survival, collective well-being, and environmental restoration.

Coda

Throughout the book, I cite many conversations I had with architects, engineers, archaeologists, artists, museum curators and staff, and others who are public figures and have themselves given interviews or published accounts of their participation in this history. I also refer to many conversations and exchanges I witnessed and participated in over a very long period of time in Coatlinchan. Some of my interlocutors there asked me to use pseudonyms, but most wanted their real names in this book. Like the engineers and workers who participated in moving the stone, many town residents told me that they had been interviewed many times by journalists, scholars, and media makers but were rarely given credit for the information they provided. Some have authored their own books, designed websites, or used social media to tell their own versions of this history and make their knowledge public—which I cite. In anthropology, we have often assumed that giving our sources pseudonyms

protects them. Sometimes this practice also dispossesses people of their stories and histories. Since some of my friends and interlocutors in Coatlinchan also engage in collecting ancient artifacts, a practice still criminalized under Mexican law, I often use only their first names, a strategy that credits specific people's stories and experiences but also ensures that the information they provided cannot be used to incriminate them. This is the best solution I could come up with, although I realize it, too, is imperfect.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. The term most commonly used in Mexico to refer to the time before Spanish colonialism and to the peoples living in this territory in ancient times is *pre-Hispanic*. This term has been critiqued as Eurocentric, implying a clear temporal break following contact and conquest by Spanish peoples. I use this term as an imperfect adjective. I also use the term *Mesoamerican*, a term coined by anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff in the 1940s, suggesting shared traits and practices uniting peoples living in much of modern Mexico and Central America both before and after the European invasion (Kirchhoff 1943).

2. The museum's combination of modernist architecture, state-of-the-art engineering, and pioneering immersive museum design has mostly been discussed by its makers in commemorative catalogs published by the institution. Scholars from various disciplines have written on aspects of its history and on its ways of establishing continuity between Mexico's ancient past and the postrevolutionary state's ideological project; see García Canclini (1992); Florescano (1993); Dorotinsky Alperstein (2002); Alonso (2004); Navarrete Linares (2010); L. Castañeda (2014); Jácome (2014); Gorbach (2016); López Hernández (2018, 2019); Rufer (2021); and Achim, Deans-Smith, and Rozental (2021).

3. On the "Mexican Miracle," see Sherman (2000); Joseph and Buchenau (2013); and Alexander (2020). The Partido Revolucionario Nacional (PRN, National Revolutionary Party), founded in 1929, was renamed the Partido Revolucionario Mexicano (PRM, Mexican Revolutionary Party) under President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938 and the PRI under President Miguel Alemán in 1946. It held power continuously until 2000 and then again from 2006 to 2012. Although an overarching history of the party has yet to be written, anthropologists and historians have analyzed its unique combination of authoritarian politics, corporatism, and co-optation of dissent (Claudio Lomnitz 1996, 1999, 2001; Camp 2011; Gillingham and Smith 2014).

4. On the Tlatelolco massacre and its effects, see Poniatowska (1971). For recent histories of the legacies of the student movement and state repression, see Vázquez Mantecón (2006); Gillingham and Smith (2014); and Rodríguez Kuri (2019).

5. Urban historians have discussed the avenue's design as an open-air museum commemorating moments of national significance as an "official" history lesson (Tenorio Trillo 1996a; Agostoni 2003; Martínez Assad 2005; Dixon 2009). On recent controversies regarding statues on the avenue, specifically the relocation and substitution of the Columbus monument, see Tenorio Trillo (2023); Valero Pie and Rabotnikof (2023); and Rozental (2024).

6. I have written elsewhere about the effects of the stone's placement on a busy street corner and restoration work undertaken in 2011 to remove hornet and bird nests and other marks resulting from its urban exposure (Rozental 2021).

7. Coatlinchan is one of 52 *delegaciones* within the Texcoco Municipality, one of 125 municipalities in the Estado de México. The town has the second largest population after the municipal capital Texcoco de la Mora. As its population grows, residents are hoping to become their own municipality.

8. In Spanish, *pueblo* refers both to a town as a physical, political, and administrative unit and to a more abstract entity that roughly translates as "the people." In Coatlinchan, residents use the term to refer to their town as a community of people related to each other as well as to the communal body that takes shape through collectively owned and administered territory and resources. For more on the term and its use in Mexico, see Eiss (2010). On its uses with regard to land tenure, see Kourí (2017).

9. The area has remained mostly barren since Lake Texcoco was gradually desiccated in viceregal times (Musset 1992; Candiani 2014) and finally disappeared in the early twentieth century (Vitz 2018; Soto-Coloballes 2019, Mendoza 2021).

10. Since the 1970s, the region's proximity to Mexico City made it ideal for anthropological explorations of continuity and change affecting communal forms of social organization and land tenure along what anthropologists define as "the folk-urban continuum" (Melville 2011). The Universidad Iberoamericana's field school based in Tepetlaoxtoc developed around the study of this area. For recent work on the area by Ibero anthropologists, see Magazine and Martínez Saldaña (2010) and Magazine (2019). For a more nuanced account of the effects of the region's urbanization and its residents' ambivalence toward this process, see Mendoza Fragoso (2022).

11. All translations of conversations and quotes from Spanish are my own, unless otherwise noted. I tried to remain faithful to the language and structure of people's speech to the best of my abilities.

12. George Kubler describes the church as one of the finest examples of early colonial architecture in the Americas (1962a, 397–98).

13. After having my research project approved during a community assembly in 2007, I lived in Coatlinchan for fourteen months in 2008–9 and have since returned for short and medium stays as well as day visits. During my time there, I lived with several families in different parts of town and of a variety of socioeconomic positions within its population. I also lived with a family that was not native to Coatlinchan and had recently arrived from Tepito. Over the course of my fieldwork, I attended as many town events as possible, participated in meetings and activities organized by the groups interested in local history, and attended community assemblies, events, and festivities. Ejido assemblies were restricted because there were land conflicts at the time and the authorities only allowed active *ejidatarios* to participate. I was able to participate in other communal bodies'

meetings, especially those related to local water use. I also attended masses and religious festivities. While living in Coatlinchan, I was invited into people's homes and work spaces and conducted periodic interviews with key informants whose testimonies and stories inspired this book's organization and arguments.

14. Jesse and I decided to work together on the film in 2009, after I had been living full-time in Coatlinchan for over a year. We proposed the project to community authorities during an assembly as an offshoot of the academic publications that would result from my work. The authorities consulted with several groups formed around a common interest in local history who received the project enthusiastically, agreeing to participate on camera and also as creative collaborators. They hosted the film crew, helped us select subjects and set up locations, organized the logistics of shoots, commented on the narrative structure of the film both during filming and during the editing process, and staged some of their practices and events for the production. Some of these stagings became important moments of ethnographic revelation that would not have been possible had it not been for the groups' collaboration in the film as well as for Jesse's and the camera's presence. I discuss several of these moments in the chapters that follow.

15. In Mexican Spanish, many words derive from Nahuatl. There are no native Nahuatl speakers in Coatlinchan today and have not been for at least two generations. Nevertheless, Nahuatl place-names and terms for many objects and practices, mostly related to agriculture and the preparation of food, continue to be in use.

16. In various parts of the world, stone is the prime material for tombs and funerary structures used to inscribe the world with human presence beyond our lifespans. Christopher Tilley (2004) explores this sense of permanence from a phenomenological perspective in his study of how Neolithic Breton Menhirs inscribe landscapes with the embodied experience and fixed identities of those who inhabited them in the past, while also affecting those who encounter them in the present and future. See also Díaz-Guardamino (2015). Roger Caillois (2014, 117) argues that thinking through and with stones reveals the relationships that intertwine human and nonhuman worlds. He is especially interested in stones and minerals that somehow go beyond their inert inorganic materiality, offering lifelike, almost animate images that do not represent or recall nature but that actually call it into being. For a different take on the ways stones are sites for rethinking the boundaries between life and nonlife, see Povinelli (1995; 2016, especially chapter 2), Reinert (2016); and Yusoff (2013, 2024).

17. Hugh Raffles looks to stone's unconformities as sites where this material's solidity is challenged by discontinuities and fissures that confront our own sense of them as "anchors in a world unmoored" (2020, 5). For Raffles, stones counterintuitively serve as sites that destabilize temporal continuity, as their materiality and the stories attached to them are marked by gaps, absences, recalcitrance, and even refusal. In his words, "the most solid, ancient and elemental materials are as lively, capricious, willful, and indifferent as time itself" (2020, 6).

18. Roger Sansi (2005, 2007) has written about other stones that cannot be severed from the people, saints, and shrines that consecrated them as part of Candomblé rituals, even if they are taken to museums.

19. Aveleyra, mostly known for his paleontological work and studies of prehistoric humans, also excavated and published on pre-Hispanic sites.

20. Andrea Ballestero explores the vibrant relations binding the elements of water and earth in underground aquifers as "elemental choreographies" (2019).

21. On the altepetl in Mesoamerican societies, see Lockhart (1992); Carrasco (1996); Fernández Christlieb and García Zambrano (2006); Navarrete Linares (2011, n.d.); Dehouve (2016); and Carballo and Robb (2017).

22. Recent work by feminist scholars of Latin America, notably geographers, has centered on the concept of "cuerpo-territorio" to emphasize the ontological, organic, intertwined, and mutually constitutive relations between bodies and territories as a response to colonial and patriarchal forms of violence and extractivism. See, for example, Gómez-Barris (2017); Marchese (2019); and Zaragocin and Caretta (2021). For a study of contemporary Indigenous claims to territory in Mexico from the perspective of legal anthropology, see Sierra Camacho, Hernández, and Sieder (2013); Mora (2017); and Adonon (2022).

23. Anthropologists have used other terms like *reverberations* (Navaro-Yashin et al. 2021) and *aftermaths* (McAllister and Nelson 2013; Kernaghan 2022a) to discuss the lasting effects of violence in different national contexts. Whereas *reverberations* recalls the movement of sound waves across time and space, Carlota McAllister and Diane Nelson point to the generativity of *aftermaths*, underscoring the term's origins as an agricultural concept linked to harvest (2013, 9–10).

24. *Montero* is used in Coatlinchan to describe people who make a living from the monte or hillside, mostly gathering wood for beams and coal and other forest resources for sale in local markets.

25. Ramírez Vázquez was known as "the architect politician" because of his administrative skills and his work heading several government agencies. For more on the architect's political career, especially his participation coordinating the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, see Rodríguez Kuri (2003, 2019) and L. Castañeda (2013b, 2014).

26. For the politics of nation making through archaeological practice and exhibition in Greece, see Hamilakis (2007) and Solomon (2021); in Israel, see Abu El-Haj (2001); and in Egypt, see Meskell (2000) and Reid (2002).

27. The concept of mestizaje was another fundamental tenet of this process; see Dawson (2004) and Tenorio Trillo (2009). For critical approaches to mestizaje as a racial politics, see Wade (2003); Moreno Figueroa (2010, 2022); and López Beltrán, García Deister, and Rios Sandoval (2014). For how the state produced the category of Indigenous people within this project, see Castillo Cocom (2004); Giraudo (2008); López Hernández (2013, 2024); Aguilar Gil (2018, 2023); and López Caballero (2021).

28. For a history of the national museum and its collections' origins in the early nineteenth century, see Morales Moreno (1994); Gorbach (2008); and Achim (2017).

29. Article 27 and its transformation of subsoil resources into national patrimonio was pictorially rendered in a mural by José Clemente Orozco; see Rodríguez Mortellaro (2015). The first laws claiming ancient artifacts as national property were drafted in 1827, soon after independence, to stop their international export as well as that of the most lucrative bases of colonial extraction: cochineal dye and silver ores (Lombardo de Ruiz and Solís Vicarte 1988). For a history of how the Mexican state came to regulate and claim what lies under the earth's surface as national property as a form of territorial sovereignty, see Bustamante (2024).

30. *Patrimony—patrimonio*'s closest English equivalent, which refers to inheritance passed down through the paternal line—is rarely used in Anglophone countries' and international legislation that refers to "heritage" or "cultural property." For a discussion of the contemporary uses of *heritage*, see Gnecco (2015). For a more in-depth discussion of this term's use in Mexico, see Rozental (2017b).

31. Renato González Mello (2017) analyzes how the concept and legal registers of patrimonio intersect with authorship and copyright law in cases related to artworks by certain Mexican artists.

32. As historians have noted, the appropriation of pre-Hispanic objects by the Mexican state and their removal from local contexts in ritual performances of nation making preceded the twentieth-century postrevolutionary state; see Tenorio Trillo (1996b); Bueno (2016); and Achim (2017).

33. Using Annette Weiner's (1992) work on "the paradox of keeping while giving" to describe inalienable possessions in Melanesia, Elizabeth Ferry (2005) explores how the concept of patrimonio was used by the members of Guanajuato's Santa Fe silver mining cooperative because of both patrimonio's inalienable status and the ways in which it circulated, consolidating kinship bonds and relations within the collective. For cases where pre-Hispanic artifacts and sites figure in local forms of sovereignty in the Yucatan, in Wixarika territories, and in the Central Valleys, see Breglia (2006) and Q. Castañeda (2009); Liffman (2011); and Morehart (2012), respectively.

34. These forms of distributed sovereignty were inherited from sixteenth-century Spanish traditions and laws as well as Catholic guilds and *cofradías*; see Christian (1981). For more on campesinos, pueblos, and corporate forms of property and personhood in Mexican history, see Chevalier (1970); Guerra (1985); and Owensby (2008). For a comprehensive study of the ejido as a legal, political, and moral category in Mexican history, see Torres-Mazuera (2016) and Kourí (2017, 2020).

35. Sahlins (2011) famously defined kinship as "the mutuality of being" between subjects who are intrinsic to one another's existence. Through kinship bonds, subjects participate in and coproduce each other's lives and are therefore indissociable from one another. I argue that the stone participates in such a "mutuality of being" by being related to and making territory in Coatlinchan.

36. Interview filmed for *The Absent Stone* in 2010 (Rozental and Lerner 2013).

37. See Martin (1989, 1991) on "sleeping metaphors."

38. Walter Benjamin's (2002) and Susan Buck-Morss's (1991, 2000) engagement with his writing opened a renewed interest in ruins and processes of ruination in anthropology, specifically as loci where colonial forms of power and violence persist into the present (Masco 2008; Stoler 2008, 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2009, 2012; Dawdy 2010; Schwenkel 2013; Yarrow 2017). See also Cristóbal Gnecco and Mario Rufer's (2023) edited volume on ruins as indices of violence in Latin America and beyond.

39. Crespo and Tozzini (2014) and Crespo (2022) describe similar cases in Argentina.

40. Residents of the neighboring towns of San Bernardino are known as "Ranas" or frogs; those from Chimalhuacan as "Pescaderos" or fish people, and those from Chicoloapan as "Chincolos" after a local bird. Others are known for their trades: those from Montecillo are "Tequesquiteros" after the sediments they collected from the former lakebed used to make nixtamal; those from Huexotla are "Tlacoyeros" after the traditional

food; and those from Cuautlalpan are "Comaleros" after the production of the earthenware used to make tortillas.

41. See, for example, the website koatlinchan.com's entry on the tlacuache and its relevance for the town, accessed August 2024, https://koatlinchan.jimdofree.com/el-tlakuache/.

42. Over the past decades, archaeologists have used ethnography to reflexively and critically explore "looting" or "huaquería" in Latin American contexts (K. Smith 2005, 2016; Antoniadou 2009; Field, Gnecco, and Watkins 2016; Londoño 2016; Barker 2018; Cevallos and Bedolla 2019; Cevallos 2023).

43. For examples of earlier histories of replicas, fakes, and forgeries of pre-Hispanic objects, see Sellen (2002) and Jennings and Sellen (2018).

44. For the first film festival held in Zapatista territories in 2018, *The Absent Stone* and Alonso Ruizpalacios's *Museo*, which fictionalized the museum's 1985 theft, were programmed back to back under the title "Ladrón que roba a ladrón" (a thief who robs a thief), riffing on the popular proverb that ends with "tiene cien años de perdón" (deserves a hundred years of pardon), implying that it is not a crime to rob a thief.

45. See Boone (1993). Following the acquisition of the Earl Stendahl papers, the Getty Research Institute, under the leadership of art historian Mary Miller, has carried out a Pre-Hispanic Art Provenance Initiative, hosting a series of conferences and editing several publications on the complicated histories and relations inscribed in collecting Mesoamerican art before and after the 1940s. See Turner and O'Neil (2024, forthcoming). See also Pre-Hispanic Art Provenance Initiative, Getty, accessed July 2024, https://www.getty.edu/projects/pre-hispanic-art-provenance-initiative/.

46. Recent decades have produced expanding scholarship on repatriation and restitution of museum collections and their effects in various disciplines. See, for example, Yalouri (2001); Barkan and Bush (2002); Fforde, Hubert, and Turnbull (2002); Peers and Brown (2003); Henare (2005); Clifford (2013); Anderson and Geismar (2017); Peers, Gustafsson Reinius, and Shannon (2017); Hicks (2020); and Turnbull and Pickering (2022).

47. On replication and itinerancy of patrimonial things in Latin American contexts, see also Rozental, Collins, and Ramsey (2016).

CHAPTER 1. A CURIOUS THING

1. Butler worked in Mexico for forty-four years and was the son of William Butler and Clementina Rowe, founders of the American Methodist Missions in India and Mexico (G. Anderson 1999).

2. Quoted in Sánchez (1886, 27). *Indian* is the term used during the viceregal period as well as during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to people of Indigenous ancestry in Mexico. The term isn't capitalized in the original Spanish.

3. For more on Velasco's work and legacy, see Piolle Altamirano (2006); Ramírez Rojas (2017); and Olivares Sandoval (2020, 2021).

4. This was common practice associated with antiquarianism whereby albums with drawings and then photographs were used to compare objects and monuments that could not be transported, allowing them to circulate and become commensurable with each other across global networks (Podgorny 2008; Gänger 2014; Moser 2014). These