The Body Cured by Cleansing: Washing Away the Evidence: Midwives and Ritual Cleansing in Mesoamerica and Colonial New Spain

JEANNE GILLESPIE
“A fascinating tour across genres and cultures of the Hispanic and Pre-Colombian worlds, illuminating concepts and depictions of the body as identity, conscience and the subject of art and literature. How has a subject so basic been ignored for so long? Andrist now corrects the record.” Nicolás Kanellos, Ph.D., Brown Foundation Professor, Director of Arte Público Press and Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage

“This very original and ground-breaking book consists of two primary themes: the human body and its functions as a subject and the body as it becomes subjected to external factors. The second theme includes three sub-themes which show how the body is subjected to illness, injury and the treatments and interventions and the eventual death in some cases. This is the best book available on the subject.” Genaro J. Pérez, Ph.D., Professor of Spanish, Co-Editor, Monographic Review, monographicreview.org

“The Body Subject and Subjected is a salient contribution to the field of carnal hermeneutics. The contributors of this provocative volume engage the reality of embodiment as experienced in the Hispanic life-world. The range of topics, including environmental, political, perceptual, and medical concerns are engaged from multiple forms of Hispanic aesthetics. Anyone fascinated by the aesthetic rationality that emerges from Hispanic life and culture will find these articles invaluable.” John Francis Burke, author of Mestizo Democracy: The Politics of Crossing Borders

“This collection of critical essays meticulously provides insightful examination on social and artistic life over a grand dimension of multicultural, trans-historic, and trans-Atlantic significance, which facilitates the reader profound understanding of the values and (self) challenges in the Hispanic world as well as for the whole humanity.” Haoying Sun, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Spanish, Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages, Texas Southern University

“This book is a compelling exploration of aesthetic representations and interpretations of the human body in the Indigenous, Hispanic American, and Spanish traditions. The thirteen essays based on varying methodological approaches provide thought-provoking material for both students and academics as the essays underscore how artists portray the body as both subject itself, and subjected to, a multitude of external factors.” Kimberly A. Habegger, Associate Professor of Spanish, Department of Modern & Classical Languages, Regis University
Contents

Preface
Acknowledgments

Part I Introduction to the Body as Subject: The Body Itself & Its Functions
1 The Body and Indigenous Control of Environment. The Fluids of Life: Blood, Water, Power and Bugs à la Tlaxcalteca
Jeanne Gillespie
2 The Body and Control via Artistic Exercise. Pablo Picasso: From Physical to Mental Dissection of the Human Body
Enrique Mallén
3 The Female Body and Control via Transformation:
The Beauty and the Beast
Debra D. Andrist
María Montserrat Feu López

Part II Introduction to the Body as Subjected: Dysfunctions, Illness and Injury
5 The Body Control of the Dysfunctional Body. Seeing With Eyes Shut: Representations of Blindness in Pablo Picasso
Enrique Mallén
6 Control of the Female Body. Threats and Violence vs. Strategies
Debra D. Andrist
Preface

In general, this book project started decades ago in a central part of the U.S. with me, a very young child, or accompanying, perished medical journeys. My own body and mind, as well as those of my colleagues, were subject to—and subjected to—many of the aspects of themes in this book: function and dysfunction in terms of illness injury, restoration in terms of treatment and interventions and, finally, death.

My very earliest memories as a two-year-old are of my father, polio, doing hundreds of push-ups on the farmhouse living-room floor as part of his recovery. A scant couple of years later, my parents found a physician who could help me with my own leprosy-like all eczema on the feet. Initially, for more than a year, we drove more than 400 miles round-trip once a week, spending two days each trip up-and-coming young physician’s office, where I became the subject of a study and article in the early days of allergy medicine.

Those experiences, insights and interest which resulted from long-term situations amplified to professional near-obsession. As a newly-minted assistant professor and social activist, I realized the life-changing/life-saving value of the practical medical applications of LOTE (the current buzz-word for “languages other than English”) language and culture acquisitions. The initial impetus grew out of emergency midnight phone calls for “freebie” translators for patients—perhaps suffering life-threatening illnesses or injuries from a small-city south-central U.S. hospital in an area with a relatively high Spanish-language-dominant population but little interest in access to other-than-English resources for medical professionals and patients. Thus, in the early eighties, I began to develop medical Spanish courses but not the traditional ones mainly limited to terminology from the Latin. Those role-playing and real-life courses morphed into the added classroom use of visual art and culture to illustrate medical situations and points, as well as essential cultural overlays. This is not to mention that these interests informed my own scholarly research, professional presentations and publications. Professors at three universities and hundreds of students over the years, undergraduates and graduates, taking both req
appeared in this third part with slightly different emphases on different aspects of the themes. For example, the coping strategies via physical and mental illness among Castellanos' female characters could be ironically interpreted as prescriptions for their continuing physical safety and mental well-being in a society sick with sexism. Or, Bartoli's cartoons “prescribed" laughter, as well as group identification support for the mental health of Spanish exiles. Once again, space dictated that articles on post-indigenous, even modern, curandería and pseudo-scientific practices popular in the Hispanic world at different points, etc. do not appear in this part.

CHAPTER 8

The Body Cured by Cleansing
Washing Away the Evidence: Midwives and Ritual Cleansing in Mesoamerica and Colonial New Spain

JEANNE GILLESPIE

In many Mesoamerican rituals, midwives and female doctors performed powerful activities related to cleansing. In fact, the divinity known as Tlazoteotl, “Divine Filth Eater” was the patron of midwives. Cleanliness and the process of renewal was so important to the Aztecs in the late 15th century that Tlazoteotl was responsible for cleansing rituals that would occur in the event of physical or psychic “dirtiness,” however, the idea of “dirtiness” did not have the same connotation as in Europe. “Dirtiness” or “contamination” was not necessarily a “bad” thing, merely a result of imbalance or of excess. At the same time, as Cecilia Klein illustrates in “Teocuitlatl, ‘Divine Excrement': The Significance of ‘Holy Shit’ in Ancient Mexico,” bodily secretions, including feces and urine, were considered precious (20–27). In The Slippery Earth, Louise Burkhart reminds us that in Mesoamerican thought, the world was a slippery place and sometimes one slipped and became soiled in the process and needed to be cleansed (112–113). When that happened, Tlazoteotl was responsible for putting things right through ritual cleansing and purification.

European missionaries appreciated some of the processes of cleansing dedicated to Tlazoteotl since their charge to spread Christianity included the introduction of the baptismal rite. The priests praised the Mexica as passionately clean people. The main problem that the priests faced with their new constituents was a disconnect between Catholic concepts of the role of sexual relations and Mesoamerican practices. Tlazoteotl’s responsibilities also included sexual practices and procreation. In the minds of the earnest
missionaries, the greatest threat to the conversion of their Amerindian charges was the sin of lust.

While Catholic approaches to sexuality demanded a marriage contract and insisted that sex was for procreation only, for Mesoamericans, sexual activity was a pleasurable experience between spouses. It was seen as a positive and healthy force if practiced in moderation. Only when sexual transgressions resulted outside of appropriate codes of conduct (incest, adultery, overindulgence) did they become issues that might cause damage to the community.

It was during these times of excess or carelessness that damage could result in citizens becoming soiled. There were cosmic repercussions, too. Excess led to the invocation of dangerous anthropomorphic forces of the universe, often called *tzitzimime*, that could be unleashed during a loss of balance. These entities, often the manifestations of women who had died in childbirth, were reported to sweep down at crossroads and seduce wayward travelers. They would also steal children and cause unexpected mayhem. External events then would be caused by the imbalances that resulted in excess or slipping. For example, missionary ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún noted that when a person who had engaged in adultery passed by a turkey enclosure, the turkey chicks died on the spot. Sahagún identifies the term *tlazomiquizti* [filth-death] for this type of event (*Florentine codex*, book 5, 191–92).

Sexually-transmitted diseases and illnesses involving the genital area were also blamed upon improper sexual conduct instigated by these malevolent forces of imbalance or by indulging in relations with a *tzitzime*. Missionary priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón devoted an entire chapter of his *Tratado de supersticiones* [Treatise on Superstitions] to diseases caused by "amor ilícito" [illicit love] and the treatments of those diseases by local healers (182–84). In Ruiz de Alarcón’s discussion of illness and superstitions from the early 17th century, he maintained that it was an "excess of adulteries" that caused the diseases that affected the genitals and reproductive organs. In the missionary’s analysis of the treatment for these illnesses, he explained that all of the diseases related to illicit love have the same cure: bathing in the sweat bath, called "temascal" in Nahuatl, with incense, smoke, and steam.

Because of the potential for disaster, sexuality and practices related to life and death (which of course are the result of sexual activity) had to be strictly controlled. In these types of events, abstinence and cleansing were vital to returning balance and harmony to the community. Tlazoteotl’s instrument for cleaning up the filth of imbalance was the temascal, the steam bath.

The connection between this cleansing ritual and Christian baptism is not lost on Ruiz de Alarcón. He states that "en este baño, pretendió nuestro enemigo imitar el santo sacramento de bautismo" (*Supersticiones* 184, "in this bath, our enemy [the devil] attempted to imitate the holy sacrament of baptism"). In performing healing rituals documented by Ruiz de Alarcón, he noted it was customary that the healer speak to the divinity known as Ciltalícuic, *Star Skirt* when the cleansing was complete, entrusting the patient to the oversight of the celestial entity to help guide the sufferer’s pathway. "Tú, mi madre de la saya estrellada (a la Vía Láctea que la tienen por Diosa): Al que hiciste y al que diste vida" (198, "You, my mother of the star skirt (of the Milky Way that they have as a Goddess): to the one that you made and that you gave life").

Tlazoteotl was known by many names, including Temascalteci, or Grandmother of the Steam Bath, and Teteoinnan (Our Grandmother), and she is described in Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Primeros memoriales.*

The array of Teteoinnan
Her lips are painted with rubber
She has placed a round patch on her face
She has placed her headdress of unspun cotton
Her ear plugs of lovely continga feathers
Her palm leaf tuft
Her skirt of snail shells is called the "Skirt of Stars" (Ciltalícuic)
Her shift has white fringes
Her shield with gold disk
Her sandals
Her broom. (Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 102–103)

You can see the connection from Ruiz de Alarcón’s commentary, the *Star Skirt*, the Milky Way, was the heavenly costume of Tlazoteotl.

There are many striking aspects in this enumeration of the divinity’s accoutrements, but for now, I would like to point out the reference to her broom, an expected tool for cleansing, and to her shield, not something we normally expect from a midwife. These two items link her intimately to the festival of Ochpanitzli, literally ‘preparing the way.’ In this festival, the midwives dressed as warriors, carried shields and weapons, and staged mock battles. They also prepared the way for the birth of Tlazoteotl’s son, Cinteotl, the patron of corn and of warfare. In preparing the way, the roads of the empire were cleaned and swept, and everything was spruced up and renewed so that the baby, representing the opening season of ritualized warfare, could come into the world successfully. It was a kind of institutionalized nesting, but it also
involved the violence of combat in which females participated. In this event, Tlazoteotl needed a shield as war mother as well as her broom for removing the filth of indulgence.

While Ochpanitzli represented an imperial level cleansing, midwives and healers performed personal cleansings, too, as we saw with Ruiz de Alarcón's documentation of the temascal purification. Throughout Mesoamerica, the temascal was the center of cleansing activity, and the image of Tlazoteotl's face often adorned the entrance of the temascal itself (Image 8.1; see page 000). Those who participated in the steam bath would enter into her body to be cleansed. Their filth would literally be eaten, freeing them from the contamination caused by the slippery earth. The earth offered its own products to facilitate the cleansing; the healers would also have selected specific plants and remedies related to the reason the participants needed to be cleansed.

In addition to sexual excess, an overindulgence of food and drink could also cause imbalances that often needed to be put right by Tlazoteotl. Another avatar, or title of Tlazoteotl was “Mayahuel” the patroness of the drink ocóli, also known as pulque, a fermented product of the agave plant (and precursor of tequila!). For the Aztecs, pulque consumption was highly regulated and only priests and the elderly could drink more than four cups. That fifth cup was a symbol of overindulgence. It was the fifth cup that caused Quetzalcoatl to be so inebriated that he committed incest with his sister and left his city of Tula in shame (Bierhorst 34). Some students of this story think that the imbalance of public drunkenness was even more of a shameful act than the taboo sexual act.

In any case, Mayahuel and pulque also played a significant role in the birth process. In Primeros memoriales, Sahagún preserved a song in her name that calls for a baby to be born.

Ayopetchli (Mayahuel)
There in the home of the one on the turtle shell bed
With necklace adorned she lies giving birth
There in her home one is given life...
Arise, arise
Newborn child arise!
Arise, arise,
Jewel child, arise! (Sahagún, Primeros memoriales, f. 278r, 142-143)

Why would a goddess devoted to an intoxicant be also involved with the birth of a baby? While pulque may be a fermented product, it is also incredibly nutritive. Studies have shown it to be high in folic acid—good for expectant mothers as well as newborns—and vitamin C, in fact, for the Otomi people of the Valley of Mexico who were famous for their pulque consumption, this was their main source of vitamin C. As we know, it can also ward against viral infections, it prevents scurvy, and it is an antiseptic and anti-inflammatory. Pulque contains niacin, calcium, riboflavin and other important vitamins as well as vitamin C. It is viscous and milky and actually resembles mothers’ milk. As we have seen, this drink was offered to newborns and their mothers to recover from the trauma of birth.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Mayahuel was said to have 400 breasts, from which flowed pulque (Sahagún, Primeros memoriales note 87, 110). The number 400, and its multipliers, especially 4X400 always refer to the stars. A starry place from which flows pulque like mother’s milk again links Mayahuel to the Milky Way and the other avatars of Tlazoteotl are evident. Reflecting back on Alarcón’s comment that in the temascal, the healer invoked the Milky Way for its healing characteristics, it is not surprising that Mayahuel, like Temascalteci, is also connected to this celestial pathway. Like pulque, mothers’ milk is also very rich in healing properties, producing antibodies that help the nursing baby build immunity to pathogens. Pulque also helped encourage lactation.

In other types of events, excess was permitted, or at least expected. Interestingly, for the Aztecs, the elderly could drink more than the four cups of pulque allowed and were the only citizens permitted to indulge in public intoxication. We know that the Aztecs attempted to keep a lid on behavior by cultivating moderation, but other communities, like the Otomies, had a reputation for excessive intoxication equal to their fame as fierce warriors. Huastec men from the Gulf Coast region were renowned for their virility and were also celebrated for their ability to drink heavily. They also wore few garments, and at least one “proper” Nahua noblewomen succumbed to her desire for a Huastec warrior after seeing him nearly naked in the market. A cohort of Huastecs accompanied Tlazoteotl in the ritual of Ochpanitzli, and they are often shown with exaggerated phallicuses (Image 8.2; see page 000).

The Tlaxcalans, a multiethnic confederation of city-states who maintained their hegemony from the Aztecs, practiced a reciprocal feasting cycle that crafted a web of obligation and social indebtedness in attempt to maintain peaceful alliances among diverse constituents. John Pohl has examined the violence and drunkenness that resulted from this reciprocal feasting using a fascinating analysis of ritual paraphernalia (184-207). Pohl discusses the tendency toward violence that results from massive feasts. The excess of intoxicants and food exaggerated offenses and inflamed tempers and rivalries. Often these
celebrations ended in fights, beatings, or worse. Interestingly, the prescribed treatment for bruises, lacerations, and head trauma produced by violence is a trip to the temascal, combined with poultices and herbals for treating the wounds. One very important medicinal herb for treating bruises was the evening primrose.

In a text explaining the accoutrements of Mayahuel, we see that she sports a huipil (a blouse) decorated by that flower. She also carries an obsidian implement. Like Tlzazotlel, this avatar carries the trappings of war as well as the power of healing.

Texcacoac Ayopechtl (Mayahuel)
Her mouth is painted with rubber, with the color blue
She has placed a patch on her face
She has put on a paper crown
Her greenstone necklace
Her huipil with the evening primrose design
Her white skirt
Her small bells, her white sandals
Her shield is whitewashed.
In her hand she has a staff its covering has a design of obsidian points.
(Sahagún, Primeros memoriales, 110)

In the multi-layered Mexican Highland signifying systems, we begin to understand that the use of pulque and of the sweat-bath rituals—internal and external cleansing rituals—combined with the healing botanicals, invocations, songs, and performances elicited a multi-ethnic interconnectedness that not only brought joy and pleasure to political and community events, but also served as healing and fortifying events to stimulate success in military and community endeavors.

Illustrations Cited
IMAGE 8.1
http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/images-5/557_07_2.jpg (public domain)

IMAGE 8.2
http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/images-6/676_13_2.jpg (public domain)

Works Cited