The Body Cured by Plants: Where Have all the (Popcorn and Chocolate) Flowers Gone?

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 lifeworld. 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.” Haiqing 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

The Body Subject & Subjected
The Representation of the Body Itself, Illness, Injury, Treatment & Death in Spain and Indigenous and Hispanic American Art & Literature

Edited by
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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, peripheral medical journeys. My own body and mind, as well as those of like me, were subject to—and subject 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, a 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 ailment, often referred to as eczema on the feet. Initially, for more than a year, we drove more than 40 miles round-trip once a week, spending two days each trip at a nearby child’s hospital in the coming young physician’s office, where I became the subject of a study and article in the early days of allergy and inhalant therapy.

Those experiences, insights and interest which resulted from these long-term situations amplified to professional near-obsession in later life. As a newly-minted assistant professor and social activist, I realized the life-changing/conditions of the practical medical applications of LOTE (the current buzz-word for “languages other than English”) language and culture acquisitions. The initial inspiration grew out of emergency midnight phone calls for “freebie” translations for patients—perhaps suffering life-threatening illnesses or injuries—from a small-town southern U.S. hospital in an area with a relatively high Spanish-language-dominant population but little interest in accessibility 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 perspectives in cultural overlays. This is to say that these interests inform my own scholarly research, professional presentations and publications. Professors at three universities and hundreds of students over the years, undergraduates and graduates, taking both required...
CHAPTER 9

The Body Cured by Plants
Where Have all the (Chocolate and Popcorn) Flowers Gone? Recovering Healing Botanicals in Nahuaatl Poetry

JEANNE GILLESPIE

How do science and art overlap in the process of documenting the Americas? What can an understanding of Mesoamerican strategies for storing knowledge add to our readings of documents compiled by European chroniclers? How did Mesoamerican and European knowledge storage systems preserve materials that could be useful or relevant in the 21st century?

We will approach these questions first from the perspective of the Spanish colonial administration, an organization that was very efficient and effective in documenting the vast territories they explored and claimed in the Americas. Spanish colonial expansion was an important strategy economically, politically, and socio-culturally. The processes employed in the documentation of new populations, lands and resources—the technologies of exploration and conquest, if you will—evolved from two distinct but related efforts in knowledge collection developed over the three centuries before the European colonization of the Americas. Upon arrival in the Americas, a third important source for the technology of knowledge collection, that of Amerindian communities, also proved important to the documentation of exploration and settlement of the Americas. Both church and state recorders relied upon local informants to flesh out the details of their reports and to document and attempt to understand the intricacies of life in the Americas. In addition, knowledge storage techniques varied from community to community, so the vast amounts of materials collected in the Archivo de Indias reflects diverse approaches to the questions posited by the Spanish administration and the clergy.

In terms of secular models for data collection, the Spanish administration responsible for exploration and colonization built on the technologies for recording the details of regions and communities perfected during the administration of Castilian ruler, Alfonso X, “the Wise.” In the 13th century, Alfonso X organized vast projects to collect and codify local heritage, to translate Arabic and Hebrew texts into Latin and Castilian, to record Spanish traditions including games and music, and to establish a legal code that would be a model for Europe and the Americas until the 19th century (and continues in Louisiana today!). Alfonso X’s thorough exploration of the complexities of Iberian culture offered a precedent for collecting not only legal and scientific data, but popular culture and regional variation. In addition, Alfonso’s legal treatise Siete Partidas (Seven Divisions) established a governing principle that included Christian, Jewish, and Moorish perspectives and commentary.

In the Iberian medieval era, the state and the church both had significant roles in the development of the ethnographic projects. While Alfonso X and his teams of scribes, translators, and data collectors were collecting materials from throughout the peninsula, Franciscan missionaries were active in documenting life and practices in the Far East in attempt to Christianize the Mongol empire. Georges Baudot points out that half a century before the publication of Marco Polo’s fabulous travel narrative, Franciscan missionaries in service to Pope Innocent VI had documented a liberal and tolerant Mongol court and warned against an overly aggressive approach to conversion in Asia (376). Juan de Piana Carpini’s Historium Mongolorum and Guillermo de Rubruk’s Litterarum ad partes orientales offered detailed, rigorous ethnographic documentation of Mongol society in hopes of securing a conversion to Christianity, and a favorable response to Franciscan missionization (376).

Although the Mongol world “fell” to Islam (at least in the eyes of the Christian administration), explorations to Africa and the West in the 15th century opened up new possibilities and new hopes for both imperial and religious prospects. In 1492, in the wake of the defeat of the Moors at Granada and the first voyage of Columbus, Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of Castilian Spanish. He also published the first Latin-Spanish/ Spanish-Latin dictionary. This new technology for the systematic collection of linguistic data would be vital to Spanish colonizing efforts and would provide a rich resource for ethnographic and linguistic study throughout the following 500 years.

In the early 16th century, eager and committed missionaries flocked to the Americas and began to collect linguistic data so that they could
convert their subjects using indigenous languages and local cultural practices. These same priests worked to document "pagan" rituals so that their colleagues might recognize certain practices as counter to the missionary efforts. We have, from that time, grammars, vocabularies, dictionaries, psalmodiae, doctrinae, and other tools for catechizing in more than one hundred languages from Mexico and what is today the southern and southwestern United States. For example, a grammar and vocabulary in Timucua compiled by Franciscan missionary Francisco de Pareja is one of the few pieces of evidence that we have about languages from Spain’s colonization of Florida. From Pareja’s work and other documentation produced in Timucua, scholar Julian Granberry was able to construct a historical and linguistic narrative of this extinct language and to identify some cultural and ethnopoetic aspects of the people who spoke Timucua and their North and Central Florida communities (47–50). These Timucua texts have helped flesh out Amerindian life in the Florida colony.

Ethnopoetics was also a consideration of the documentary processes of Alfonso X and several of his heirs, who collected cantigas, canciones and romances, collections of songs in local voices that reflected local and regional themes and histories. These canciones and romances store a substantial repository of Castilian, Galician, Portuguese, and Catalan oral compositions as well as Arabic and Hebrew oral texts and poetry. This practice of collecting oral and performance texts also transferred to the Americas. At least two collections of documents that collected Nahuatl poetic texts also have survived from the colonial era. These are known as the Cantares mexicanos and the Romances de los señores. They are typical of "cancioneros/romancers" seen throughout Iberia in that they collect oral texts performed during the era, but they are also important because these texts are containers of Mesoamerican knowledge and part of the documentation of Mesoamerican historical, ethnographic, and ethnopoetic data as well.

The Franciscans Bernardino de Sahagún and Toribio de Benavente established substantial collections of ethnographic documentation in the Valley of Mexico beginning in the early 1530’s. Another important Franciscan contributor in central Mexico was Alonso de Molina who compiled his Arte de la Lengua Nahuatl in 1555. Miguel Angel Esparza Torres explains that Molina’s study of the language was heavily influenced by Nebrija and it has served as an extremely useful source for Nahuatl studies in the late 20th century (27–34).

These poetic texts themselves are treasure troves of many kinds of data, including ethnobotanical information related to local ritual and healing practices as well as texts that help us understand how the local communities adapted the teaching of the missionaries. Specifically, I would like to look at several texts that show ethnopoetic information from the Psalmodia cristiana by Sahagún and the Cantares mexicanos that can be linked to ethnobotanical data collected in the grammars, various medicinal texts and the Relaciones geográficas. To accomplish this, I will look at a selection of Amerindian texts that mention a specific flower, the izquixochitl, which is translated as “popcorn flower” in many English translations. It can also be translated as “roasted corn flower.” This flower, generally identified as Bourreria huanita or B. Formosa, comes from a tree that is native to the Gulf Coast region and is often mentioned in conjunction with the cacao flower, cacahuaxochitl, from the same region.

In order to begin to unlock the possible meanings of this image, we must consult the Spanish sources as well as Amerindian sources and from here we will see what we can uncover. I would like to start with a psalm composed in the mid-16th century for a celebration of St. Bernardino’s day. This comes from Sahagún’s Psalmodia and it gives us an idea of the lush and powerful images that the Americas offered.

MAY. St. Bernardino’s Day.
FIRST psalm
Let us honor the cypress tree of quetzal feathers, the silk cotton tree of trogon feathers, which our lord God caused to bud — St. Francis.

Everywhere in the world their covering, their protection, shades all the children of the Holy Church. And in its shade, in its protection, we, the people of New Spain, are here happy, rejoicing greatly.

All the various heavenly flowers spread [perfume] on it; all the various heavenly precious stones grow as its fruit. The heart flower, the godly popcorn flower, the cacao flower, the Indian corn flower, the cup flower, the red bone flower there are all arched, fragrant; scattered widely. They shine like the golden dew. The emerald-green jade, the fine green
jade, the ruby, the pearl, the amethyst,
all the various precious stones lie massed
there, gathered together, gleaming there
— shining.
(Sahagún's Psalmodia, fols. 89r–92r; Anderson's translation)

This offers an idyllic image. It is certainly easy to picture St. Francis of Assisi right in the middle of the scene. The treatment of the “godly popcorn flower” suggests a special category unique to this botanical. Upon examining a second collection of poetic texts, we begin to see how the popcorn flower is treated in other settings.

Beat your flower drum beautifully, singer.
Let there be popcorn flowers, cacao flowers.
Let them scatter let them sprinkle down
beside the drummer. Let us have joy.
There! The turquoise swan, the trogon, the
roseate swan is singing, warbling, happy with
these flowers. (Bierhorst, 190–191)

This is still a beautiful scene with the interesting addition of the drum and the song. It is also interesting that we are scattering flowers and having a joyous celebration, and again we have popcorn flowers and cacao flowers used together again. While I have taken these excerpts out of their context and that there are many more details and some problems with Bierhorst's translation that could be explored, but for now, I will continue to concentrate on examples using the popcorn flower. Here is another text from the Cantares mexicanos:

My song's begun within the House of Flowers, and at once I carry off
my little princeling. I'll pleasure the little jewel. He dances, t 789his
little babe, this little Ahuitzotl. / Cry no more my little princeling.
These flowers and these bells of yours! You dance with these o jewel.
/I, a Mexican girl [female], am rocking the world! Off I go carrying
my shield cradle, for there beyond where he lies, this treasure, this
little war-flower babe of mine. . . My breasts [my created ones] are
popcorn flowers. In bed with raven blooms [plumeria] we’ve been
entwined [or we’ve been wholed with raven blooms]. (Bierhorst,
263–265)

Patricia Granziola helps us understand this reference a little better:

The Goddess Xochiquetzal (flower-feather), patron of artisans and
sexual love, was associated with the popcorn flower izquirochitl
(Bouvreira buanita Hemsl.), a flower that, according to Francisco
Hernandez, was very much appreciated for its fragrant smell and
curative properties. It was mixed with cacao to make chichante. The
izquirochitl in [N]ahuatl means toasted maize flower (Izquitl-oxchitl)
because its seeds pop out like toasted corn. It has been considered a
symbol of life, the metaphor of maize, and a basic plant in
Mesoamerican alimentation. (187)

So, how does the izquirochitl imagery from the song connect the
flower and the text to Xochiquetzal? What we see in this text is a babyoy “Ahuitzotl” in the House of Flowers. Ahuitzotl was an Aztec
warrior and ruler who participated in the Flowery Wars, where adver-
saries set out on specific dates to engage in warfare to capture
prisoners as sacrificial victims that would assure the proper rainfall
and general cosmic well-being. Ross Hassig has written extensively
about the practices of Xochiyeoyotl or Flowery Wars and Ahuitzotl’s
participation in this ritualized warfare (200–218).

The voice of the “Mexican girl” explains that she is pleasing the
infant ruler with her breasts . . . that are popcorn flowers. Actually,
the Aztecs were obsessed with bodily fluids, and in this case, her
pleasure is that of a nursemaid, suckling the warrior baby and rocking
him in his shield cradle so he will grow up to be a powerful warrior.
The popcorn flower here is a metaphor for her milk. There are few
things sweeter than a nursing baby’s breath and few more pleasured
faces than those of a satiated baby. Mother’s milk (or in this case, the
nursemaid’s milk) is linked to a flower that also produces similar
effects.

Recent pharmacological research has identified hypnotic, antide-
pressant, and anxiolytic properties in the izquirochitl (984–985).
According to Indra Holzman and a team of Guatemalan and Brazilian
researchers, “ethnobotanical surveys conducted in Guatemala have
shown that the infusion of dried [izquirochitl] flowers is popularly
used as a tranquilizer, to cure heart diseases and high blood pressure,
as an analgesic, and as an antiseptic, mainly for skin complaints”
(984). This flower was mixed into cacao to make a fortifying drink
that the warriors would consume before battle, babies were offered
this to strengthen them and lactating mothers also consumed this so
their milk would be productive. In a sense, these little white flowers
acted as a restorative with calming properties much like nature’s
mother’s milk. The goddess Xochiquetzal is sometimes portrayed with
these flowers in her headdress and she is the patron of midwives and
doctors as well as artisans and sexuality (IMAGE 9.1; see page 000). In the Mesoamerican context, however, this is all designed to produce success in warfare, whether the battle of humans with their environment or actual organized warfare.

As we look deeper, and as Marie Sautron confirmed, “popcorn flower cacao flower” metaphorically represents the preparations for warfare (246–47). Further, each of these flowers comes from the Gulf Coast, adding an exotic touch to the conversation. Popcorn and cacao flower, like the chocolate they infused, were the ultimate luxury goods and had to be imported at great effort. If we look back at the second text in context with other similar songs, we find that the beating of the drum and the sprinkling of flowers also suggest the preparations for ritual before warfare or the celebration of a battle victory. The importance of these ingredients are reinforced with their mention and their representation in the images of the painted texts.

We begin to understand the links between the botanicals, the actions, and the actors in the metaphoric poetic practices characteristic of Nahuatl compositions. As we become more aware of how the botanical references reflect not only political, but pharmacological aspects, we see a dense, semiotically rich environment that the missionary priests may have not entirely understood. With the proper “homework” however, we can begin to tease out the deeper layers of meaning and understand better the Mesoamerican signifying practices being collected.

The izquixochitl is a tiny white flower that packs significant healing and olfactory attributes. The flower is used to adorn the headdress of one of the most important female divinities in the pantheon, and the flower itself is an additive to luxury consumption of cacao. In the pictorial and linguistic records of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, it receives significant attention. This flower was not chosen because of one characteristic, but because of the complex messages that it signifies: botanically, medicinally, geographically, culturally, aesthetically, and sensorially. The numerous layers of signification indicate an important role for this botanical. The Cantares mexicanos and other poetic colonial texts are rife with references to flowers and other plants, animals, and natural phenomena that indicate an extremely well developed medical understanding of the natural resources of the region. Many of the other animals and plants that are referenced in Nahuatl “poetry” also have medicinal or other scientific properties. This is a call to reexamine Mesoamerican literary and pictorial arts with and eye for scientific and medicinal references. We have much to learn.

Illustration Cited
IMAGE 9.1: Xochiquetzal with izquixochitl flowers in her headdress. (public domain).
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