

**CHAPTER THREE****The Whole of Our Flesh**

Our discussion of colonial healers in the previous chapter alluded to the variety of etiological beliefs that circulated throughout Mexico during the colonial period. All societies, be they small groups of hunter-gatherers, peasant-based systems, or industrialized societies, find a way to explain how and why people fall sick. Disease causes determine curing strategies. The treatment for an illness brought on by divine punishment, for example, will most likely incorporate the use of prayer and rituals of penitence, whereas an ailment caused by exposure to excessive cold may be treated with "hot" medicines and foods. Ideas about disease causation also tell us quite a lot about how people imagine the internal processes taking place in their otherwise opaque bodies. Even when causes were thought to originate outside the body, how did disease proceed once inside? What role did the blood and the vital organs play? Ultimately, agreed-on etiologies provide us with a window into a particular culture because they incorporate and confirm its basic ways of organizing the world. This is particularly apparent in the case of the Nahuas, whose worldview was constructed around the continual interplay between order and disorder, a process that had a profound effect on the welfare of human beings. Here, we look at native Mexican ideas about disease causation and, by extension, at conceptions about how the human body worked. Compared with contemporary European etiology, Nahua beliefs about how and why the body became ill are quite complex and defy easy categorization. Although both cultures perceived health threats along a continuum between natural and supernatural causes, native Mexicans accorded the supernatural much more involvement in human health than Spaniards did. 1

**A Slippery Earth**

Although it is impossible to convey the richness and breadth of the Mesoamerican worldview here, a brief overview is vital because ideas about health and disease were firmly grounded in underlying conceptions of how the world was structured. Human beings lived at the center of a universe where cosmic struggles acted themselves out in all aspects affecting human life. Although Mesoamericans and Europeans appeared to structure cosmic space in similar ways—the horizontal divisions of heaven, the underworld, and a terrestrial plane on which humans lived—this parallelism was superficial at best. One striking difference was the animate character of the Nahua universe; all features of their physical world—mountains, the wind, bodies of water, the sun, sky, and stars, as well as the earth itself—were animate beings.<sup>1</sup> In her astute work on the Christianization of Indians in the sixteenth century, Louise Burkhart notes that in such a world, so much of Nahua communication was directed toward interaction with nonhuman forces of nature rather than interaction with other human beings. Comparing this to a Christian cosmology which viewed the physical world as passive matter, she notes: 2

When the very hills are alive, a people's place in the cosmos differs fundamentally from a world where human beings rule over a passive creation. The Nahuas did not set humanity off from the rest of nature like Christianity does. Human beings were part of the world; the world was not something to be rejected or striven against.<sup>2</sup>

Mesoamerican mapping of the universe placed the earth between a nine-layered underworld and a thirteen-layered heaven. This numerical division of space was linked to a parallel division of time. The 260-day ritual calendar was based on nine lunar months, the period of human gestation; when divided by twenty, the basic unit of the Mesoamerican number system, the result is thirteen. The calendar consisted of a repeating sequence of twenty day-signs, or *tonalli*, each paired with other repeating sequences corresponding back to the division of vertical space and day and night. Thus days, symbolically paired with the thirteen layers of heaven, occurred in units of thirteen; nights, corresponding to the nine layers of the underworld, came in units of nine. Each moment on earth, then, was influenced by a complex combination of phenomena originating in the various layers above and below the earth. The life of an individual was further influenced by his or her date of birth, or day-sign. One's *tonalli*, however, was not merely the imprint of a certain fate, but, rather, a kind of inherent animate force that had important effects on one's character and temperament. Specialists, the *tonalpouhque*, "enumerators of the tonalli," trained in reading the complex astrological influences of a particular day, were consulted to advise individuals on auspicious days for important events: the baptism of a child, the planting of crops, or the date of a marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Each level of the universe was associated with diverse gods and minor supernatural beings. Many of these deities were represented as conjugal pairs, reflecting the concept of cosmic duality, which was one of the key organizing factors in Nahua culture. Creation myths emphasized the male-female dichotomy—the prime creator gods were a male and female pair, Ometecuhtli, "Lord of Duality," and Omecihuatl, "Lady of Duality." Deities also exhibited contrary attributes within themselves. All goddesses of the earth-mother complex had some connection to fertility and death—for example, those in the myths surrounding Coatlicue, the great mother-goddess who gave birth to the sun, moon, and stars. Her son, Huitzilopochtli, the warlike god of the sun, killed and dismembered his siblings Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, and Centzon Huitznahua, a representation of the stars. Coatlicue thus embodied the dual concept of creation and destruction that the Nahuas saw as present in all life.<sup>4</sup>

Mesoamerican dualism was not merely an abstract philosophical principle but held sway over the everyday lives of individuals. Because gods contained opposite characteristics within themselves, particular deities could nurture crops and also destroy them, provoke sexual sin and forgive it, bring on illness and cure it. Other polarities helped to structure the natural world such as light and darkness, drought and humidity, hot and cold. These diametrical elements formed part of an overarching unity that could not be reduced to mere opposition between positive and negative; rather, each side formed an essential part of the whole. From death comes life, from destruction comes creation. The creative, positive forces and

destructive, chaotic forces were two sides of the same coin, each dependent on the other for its functioning. In such a world, the primary challenge for human beings was to find the proper balance between order and chaos. Contact with chaos and disorder was essential because it was the source of life, yet one had to maintain the order and stability necessary for physical and social survival. As we will see, this order/disorder model significantly shaped ideas about moral conduct in everyday life and, in turn, about health. The association of sickness with disorder was a strong one in Nahua life; any form of sexual excess, immoderation in food or drink, any exposure to "filth" in both a physical and moral sense, could make one ill. These ever-shifting forces of order and disorder made the earth a particularly dangerous place. In quoting an adage recorded by Sahagún—"it is slippery, it is slick on the earth"—Burkhart notes:

This was said of someone who had lived a good life but then fell into some *tlatlacolli* [wrong doing], as if slipping in the mud. It is easy to commit immoral acts not because demons tempt or the flesh is weak or the soul corrupt, but because of the nature of things: the earth is slippery.<sup>5</sup>

In such a precarious world, then, maintaining balance was essential. Keeping sickness at bay meant that one was continually working to preserve an equilibrium, not only in one's body, but in one's social relations and with the deities as well.

### **Picturing the Body**

According to Alfredo López Austin, the word the Nahuas used to designate the human body as a whole, *tonacayo*—literally, "the whole of our flesh"—was the same term used to refer to the fruits of the earth, especially maize, their most important food.<sup>6</sup> This metaphorical connection of physical sustenance with human flesh was not the only way Mesoamericans linked their corporal being to their cosmic structure. Like the natural world around them, human bodies contained several animate forces which were responsible for such things as development and growth, body heat, breathing, emotions and passions, and powers of perception. Three have been identified by scholars as being vital for the functioning of the body: *teyolia*, or *yolia*, located in the heart; *ihiyotl*, located in the liver; and *tonalli*, found in the head. Although the deities imbued humans with these forces, it seems that the Nahuas considered any change in them as essentially naturalistic in their effects on health. One way to understand this, for heuristic purposes at least, would be to distinguish between proximate and ultimate disease causes. Proximate, or natural, causes locate sickness as a result of routine bodily processes that have gone awry, the physical result of something tangible in the environment or a natural change in the condition of the individual. Thus, the effects of cold, heat, or fatigue, the consumption of certain foods or herbs, and the effects of old age would be viewed as proximate causes, just as would the injuries of the battlefield or work site, or an illness brought on by the bite of a poisonous snake. Ultimate causes, or theories about why such "natural" events happen in the first place, tend not to be found in natural phenomena or

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chance, but in what one scholar calls the "super-social relations of hostility," or the full extension of human society that includes supernatural actors.<sup>7</sup> Yet the disentanglement of natural from ultimate causes, although helpful to those of us who have a hard time envisioning bodily processes outside of a biomechanical model, is not something in which the Nahuas would have consciously engaged. Their view was much more holistic.

Like ourselves, the Nahuas conferred a central role to the heart in the human body. Not for its function of pumping blood, which we presume they did not know about, but because this was the location of the *teyolia*, the vital force responsible for one's knowledge, emotions, personality traits, and vitality. The *teyolia*, which was conveyed to the fetus during gestation, was a kind of divine force clearly seen in people of exceptional talent in the fields of religion and art. The good painter of codices, for example, was *yolteotl*, "deified heart," whereas the bad featherworker had a heart that was wrapped up, "his heart was covered." Damage to the heart brought on serious illness. The Nahuas believed some diseases covered the heart with phlegm. Molina, for example, refers to the expression *Tlayohuallotl mopan momana* as a loss of consciousness, or "an illness that envelops the heart and causes swooning." The *Relación de Yetecomac* refers to people who became ill because "their hearts were covered."<sup>8</sup> Many of the ailments mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* describe symptoms that involve the heart: a "nausea about the heart," an "anguished" heart, a "heart [that] seems faint," a "congested heart." *The Badianus Manuscript*, an indigenous herbal written in the mid-sixteenth century, recommends a strong purge for "oppression of the chest," an ailment that makes one feel "constricted" by a "certain fullness" in the chest area.<sup>9</sup>

Sixteenth-century friars chose the native *teyolia* or *yolia*, as a translation for *ánima*, or soul in their efforts to find parallels in native thought categories, although, as Burkhart points out, the frequent use of *ánima* alone in early religious texts suggests that they did not find the Nahua concept completely appropriate. Like the Christian soul, the *yolia* animated the body, was partly responsible for character, and survived after death; yet these similarities were more apparent than real. With its neat conception of the body/soul dichotomy, Christian theology separated the soul from the flesh in a way that the Nahuas never could; for them, the body was a composite of several fleshy and spiritual elements, all of which had to operate harmoniously for a person to maintain physical and mental health. Metaphysical elements of human existence were not set off from the material side of life, but were continuous with it, all integrated into a single monist conception of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Another important animistic force, *ihiyotl*, was found in the liver. It was closely associated with breath or respiration but also with passions and such feelings as anger and envy. There is some evidence to suggest that *ihiyotl* was thought to have qualities of a luminous gas which could influence other beings. The idea that emanations from one person, especially those who had committed immoral acts, could damage others was common among the Nahuas. Immorality was often expressed in terms of dirt or filth, *tlazolli*, with the offender becoming polluted and thus polluting to others. This contagious quality of pollution is the central idea

underlying the concept of *tlazolmiquiztli*, "filth death" or *tlazolmiquiliztli*, "dying of filth." The filth resulting from transgressions lodged in the liver of the perpetrator, the seat of the *ihiyotl*; he or she, in turn, released emanations that were harmful to anything around them. Thus, a child could become ill by a parent's misdeed; turkey chicks died in the presence of someone involved in an illicit love affair; the emanations of adulterers could hurt their spouses; and merchants' goods could be damaged by their own sexual misdeeds.<sup>11</sup>

With *tlazolli* such a threat to well-being, it is not surprising to find that the symbolic manipulation of dirt and cleanliness constituted an important part of Mesoamerican ritual. The Nahuas' removal of filth centered on the rites of sweeping and bathing. According to Sahagún, homes and courtyards were swept daily, as indeed they still are today.<sup>12</sup> Sweeping, which removed polluting substances away from the center to the periphery where they belonged, was one of the penitential rites practiced on a daily basis.<sup>13</sup> *Tlazolli* affecting the body had to be removed by bathing. The infant was ritually bathed at birth to remove the "filthiness which thou has taken from thy mother, from thy father."<sup>14</sup> The *tlazolli* washed from the child was the residue of his or her parents' sexual activity, too much of which was thought to be harmful to the developing fetus. The elders who advised young pregnant women addressed the issue of sexual intercourse during pregnancy. In early stages of gestation, sexual activity was thought to be salutary because the accumulation of semen nourished and strengthened the fetus; later in the pregnancy, however, too much semen was a danger as it became sticky and viscous, increasing the baby's risk of becoming stuck during birth.<sup>15</sup> Removing the filth associated with sexual transgression frequently involved bathing. Ruiz de Alarcón identifies this as *tetlacolaltioni*, a "bath for the sickness caused by love affairs or by affection," a ritual that, in addition to washing the body, involved special incantations and the use of incense.<sup>16</sup> Bathing was not solely tied to sexual violations; other crimes against the social order demanded a purification through washing as well. As they were being released from incarceration, prisoners who had been falsely accused or whose offenses had not been so grave, immediately bathed in the pure waters of Chapultepec "to lay aside their crimes." But to those who had committed more serious crimes—*theft or adultery*—the rebuke was unequivocal: "nowhere is there water with which thou wilt bathe thyself, with which thou wilt cleanse thyself."<sup>17</sup> Bathing was not always enough.

For the Nahuas, then, exposure to *tlazolli* had direct physical consequences. Filth and illness were so closely linked that Tlazolteotl, the goddess of filth was also the patron goddess of healers. Daily bathing with a soap made from the fruit of *copalxócotl* (*cyrtocarpa edulis*) was a common practice among the Nahuas, a custom that astounded the bathing-averse Spaniards in the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the purifying effects of bathing were an important therapy in ancient Mesoamerican medicine. The healing properties of the *temazcal*, or sweat bath, still used today in some indigenous communities, presumably derived from its

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ability to induce sweating, ridding the body of *tlazolli* lodged in the flesh. According to the native doctors who contributed their medical knowledge to the *Florentine Codex*, this therapy was widely used to treat both physical and psychological symptoms:

And the sick there restore their bodies, their nerves. Those who are as if faint with sickness are there calmed, strengthened. They are to drink one or another of the medicines, as has been mentioned. And one who perhaps has tripped and fallen, or who has fallen from a roof terrace; or someone has mistreated him—his nerves are shattered, he constantly goes paralyzed—they there make him hot. . . . And one who has scabs, [one] whose body is much festered, [one] whose body is not [too] much covered with sores, they there have [such as these] wash.<sup>19</sup>

Nahua notions of *tlazolli* vividly illustrate the strong links between the physical and the moral in Mesoamerican conceptions of the body, a link that was much more direct than it was for Europeans. Practices deemed as immoral were physically debilitating; failure to participate in penitential ritual could be punished with disease. Europeans, too, sometimes saw disease as punishment for sin, although this connection was more arbitrary than absolute. Rather, Christian doctrine tended to view this relationship in more symbolic terms. The condition of the body provides a metaphor for that of the soul; because the soul is immaterial, sickness can only be a metaphor for a soul corrupted by sin.<sup>20</sup> It was little wonder then that Spaniards and Nahuas had such different views of the body, health and illness, and even practices such as personal hygiene. Not sharing the same assumptions about illness and filth, early modern Europeans bathed infrequently and, in fact, thought that too much exposure to water was a threat to their health, a topic that we explore in Chapter 4.

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The third animistic entity found in the human body was the *tonalli*, located in the head. According to Molina, this word was derived from the verb *tona*, "to irradiate," and had several meanings, including solar heat, summer, day, day-sign, one's destiny according to their birth date, and "soul or spirit." Many scholars have written about the nature of *tonalli*, from its ancient origins to its present-day permutations, and rightly so, as this multifaceted entity played—and in some indigenous groups still plays—a vital role in human life. An entire volume would be necessary just to examine its connection to the Mesoamerican calendar, day signs, human fate, and character. My goal here is more modest: to look at *tonalli* and its associations with sickness and health.

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The idea of *tonalli* as a life force revolves around its role in giving the body its warmth. In some instances the Nahuas believed they could increase *tonalli* by placing the body next to a fire. According to Sahagún's informants, newborns were always placed by a fire for the first four days of their lives, after which time they would be ritually bathed and named. This fire was so vital to the infant's life that no one was allowed to light another from it as that would imperil the child's well being.<sup>21</sup> Physical growth was directly connected to one's *tonalli*, which would explain why the Nahuas attributed life force to body parts that grew, such as teeth, nails, and, especially, the hair. Because it was located in the head, a very close relationship existed between the *tonalli* and the hair. This gave rise to all sorts of beliefs about human hair:

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since it covered the head, protecting the *tonalli*, its removal could make a person vulnerable to illness; it was thought to have medicinal properties; it could exhibit a will of its own, like *tonalli* itself; and, because of its life-giving force, the hair of the deceased was kept in their memory. In addition, the hair of captives caught in battle could intensify the fighting powers of those who kept it, as could that of a woman who had died in her first childbirth. People performing tasks that demanded great energy and force could never cut or wash their hair. This was true of priests as well as traveling merchants who set out on long and arduous journeys.<sup>22</sup> Although the *tonalli* was found in the head, and cures associated with it were directed for the most part toward the crown of the head, the face, and forehead, its force flowed throughout the entire body. Just how the Nahuas thought this happened is not known, although indigenous groups today say the blood is its carrier. What is clear, however, is that ancient Nahuas thought *tonalli* was essential for life; the human body could live without it, but not for very long.

In his descriptions of indigenous healing methods in the seventeenth century, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón describes how a female healer—known as *atlan tlachixque*, a "looker into water"—held a sick child over a pool of water in order to see its reflection. If the child's face was clearly visible, it had a good prognosis; if the face appeared dark, was difficult to see, "as if covered by some shadow," the child was judged to be suffering from a loss of *tonalli*, a potentially serious condition.<sup>23</sup> The Nahuas believed the *tonalli* left the body under certain conditions, such as during sleep or in the state of drunkenness, but there were special circumstances under which its departure might be especially dangerous. In the highly moralistic world of the Nahuas, it comes as no surprise to find that many of these situations revolved around sexual activity. Early sexuality diminished the *tonalli* and shortened one's lifespan, but even well into adulthood, a man was advised to be moderate, even with his own wife. "Thou art not to devour, to gulp down the carnal life as if thou wert a dog," the Nahua elders warned the next generation of young men. Immoderate sexual activity will drain a man of his strength, cause him to become dry and shriveled like a maguey plant from which the juice has been drained or a cape that has been washed and tightly wrung so that it dries quickly. "Not only art thou useless, but soon thy nasal mucus goeth hanging; thou wilt go toothless, thou wilt go on hand and knees, thou wilt go pale." In short, too much sex could make one sick. It is interesting to note, however, that the Nahuas did not appear to believe that women were as vulnerable to these dangers. Perhaps it was simply the case that women, being confined to hearth and home, did not need to be admonished as much as men. Yet the concern with men depleting their vital forces too early in life may also have had something to do with what happened during sexual intercourse itself: namely, that women did not suffer the fluid loss, through ejaculation, that men did. Sahagún's informants recount a short anecdote about older women seeking out younger men for sexual favors. When asked to give their reasons for this outrageous act they said:

Ye men, ye are sluggish, ye are depleted, ye have ruined yourselves impetuously.  
It is all gone. There is no more. There is nothing to be desired. But of this, we  
who are women, we are not the sluggish ones. In us is a cave, a gorge, whose

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only function is to await that which is given, whose only function is to receive.  
 And of this, if thou hast become impotent, if thou no longer arousest anything,  
 what other purpose wilt thou serve?<sup>24</sup>

Because the *tonalli* was thought to leave the body briefly during coitus, any interruption during the sexual act itself, might prevent its full return. Likewise, a sudden fright or shock allowed the *tonalli* to escape—a belief that has survived in the present form of the folk illness *susto*. Molina translated the word *netonalcaualtilizli* as "he who is frightened of something," but it literally translates as "the loss of *tonalli*."<sup>25</sup> To be frightened during sexual intercourse must have been especially ominous, even for a married couple entitled to sex since their animating forces might flee their bodies and leave them vulnerable to sickness. Sahagún's medical informants mention medicine used to treat diseases brought on by a fright during sex, effective even if the man's "body turns black . . . when already he loses flesh; even if he has been sick one year, or perhaps already four years, it is required." The loss of *tonalli* through sexual intercourse was also a factor in an ailing patient's recovery. Many of the medicines listed by Sahagún are used in treating people who have had a relapse because they apparently engaged in coitus while they were still in a weakened state.<sup>26</sup> 15

As we can see from this brief discussion of the *teyolia*, *ihiyotl*, and *tonalli*, the physical and supernatural were tied to human health in ways that are very difficult to unravel. These animating forces, so vital to physical and psychological functioning, affected well-being in concrete ways—the *tonalli*'s connection to body temperature and growth, for instance—yet they also appear to have been conduits through which supernatural forces, usually triggered by sexual transgression, manifested themselves inside the body. Disease, as with other kinds of misfortune, ultimately originated in the dialectical interplay between human behavior and chastising gods, a topic that we turn to in the next section. 16

## Deities and Dwellers of Dangerous Places

Mesoamerican religion encompassed a bewildering variety of supernatural forms that contrasted sharply with Western conceptions of deity. Some of these forces were major gods, for example, Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, or Tlaloc, but many others were simply their envoys and helpers, or other kinds of spirits who resided in the peripheral zones of the earth such as caves, lakes, streams, and forests. The deities themselves embodied order and disorder, sometimes deceiving humans, other times bestowing on them acts of kindness. Huitzilopochtli, was a "madman, a deceiver," but also just a "common man"; Tezcatlipoca was a creator of things, yet he could bring "all things down," he mocked and ridiculed men, but "bestowed riches" on them as well; Tlaloc, the god of rain, was the provider of things essential to life—the trees, grasses, and maize—yet he was the cause of death, especially by way of drownings and lightning bolts.<sup>27</sup> This extensive divine entanglement with life on earth meant that human beings, in order to limit their exposure to misfortune, were continually engaged in a process of propitiation. Gods had to be appeased, the calendar of rituals carefully 17



observed, and penitential exercises avidly performed. One had to conduct one's life carefully, being sure to follow the guidelines laid down by the ancestors, least one slip and fall into the abyss. Burkhart notes that early colonial Nahuatl texts are full of "torrent-and-precipice" tropes—tripping and stumbling, falling off precipices and into caves—that stand in as metaphors for, or actual results of, moral straying.<sup>28</sup> For the Nahuas, the physical state of their bodies was bound to the conduct of mercurial gods: any violation of a moral code or failure to observe vital rituals—the transgressing of significant boundaries—exposed one to the unpleasant repercussions of disease.

Tezcatlipoca was the Nahuas' principle god and most likely the ultimate cause of all ailments attributed to supernatural powers. A complex deity, he appeared under many guises—Titlacahuan, Moyocoyatzin, Yaotzin, among others—and was closely associated with the forces of disorder and chaos, dirt and filth. A skunk's entrance into one's house was an ominous sign that Tezcatlipoca was about to unleash his wrath: its foul stench "entered into one," auguring death and destruction. Sahagún's informers were very explicit about the afflictions he was capable of causing: "he stoned [men] with plagues, which were great and grave—leprosy, pustules, knee swellings, cancers, the itch, hemorrhoids, piles, humors of the feet, and still other sicknesses." Some gods were associated with specific diseases. Skin and eye afflictions were the province of Xipe Totec, a god affiliated with the renewal of spring and a deity favored by the Zapotecs. He tormented people with "blisters, festering, pimples, eye pains, lice about the eyes, opacity, filling of the eyes with flesh, withering of the eyes, cataracts, glazing of the eyes." Sexual intercourse during a fast was punished by Macuilxochitl, one of the flower deities, who gave the offenders "as their merit, their lot," venereal afflictions. The Tlaloc complex of deities caused people to suffer maladies and mishaps that the Nahuas associated with water—not only drownings and lightning strikes but also afflictions that caused the body to swell with fluid, such as dropsy or gout.<sup>29</sup>

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Threats to health lurked in other supernatural aspects of the natural world as well: *echecame* and the *tloaque*, spirits of the wind and waters respectively, resided in the mountains, caves, and springs. Ruiz de Alarcón mentioned a group of spirits that lived in the forest, the *ohuican chaneque*, or "dwellers of dangerous places." Because these were points of contact with the underworld, they represented to the Nahuas zones of the periphery, places of danger. The person who ventured into these sites risked contracting gout, "of the feet or hands, or of anywhere on the body," a stiff neck, or paralysis in one of the limbs.<sup>30</sup> The Nahuas made much reference to center and periphery in their discourse. Their dwelling place on earth put them right at the center of the universe. The Mexica, the dominate partners in the Triple Alliance that ruled much of central Mexico on the eve of the conquest, centered themselves in the heart of Tenochtitlan, symbolized by the Great Temple. Cities, with tidy houses and swept streets, were places of order; the space outside of town was liminal and dangerous. At the local level, one's home represented the center as well, a microcosm of ordered space.<sup>31</sup> One of the adages recorded by Sahagún, *otimatoiaivi, otimetepexiuj*, "thou hast cast thyself into the torrent . . . from the crag," is said of someone who has crossed into the periphery with his or

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her behavior, one "who has placed [themselves] in danger . . . who brings about that which is not good."<sup>32</sup> All unchecked behavior exposed one to a precarious outcome. Burkhart offers an anthropological perspective:

Movement into and out of ordered space had powerful moral implications. The argument operates on this analogy: secure center is to dangerous periphery as moral conformity is to immorality. Internal metaphor equates immoral acts with movement into dangerous places. This metaphor is treated metonymically, such that the immoral person is actually described as someone who enters these places, as if the act of movement and the immoral deed belong to the same behavioral domain.<sup>33</sup>

Another place fraught with symbolic danger was the crossroads. Associated with uncontrolled female sexuality, sorcery, and the underworld, this was where the Cihuateteo, the women who had died in their first childbirth, came to haunt people and inflict illness on children. When someone had seizures or convulsions, when "one's mouth was twisted, one's face was contorted; one lacked use of a hand, one's feet were misshapen," it was said of them they were possessed by the Ciuapipiltin, the goddesses who dwelt at the crossroads.<sup>34</sup> But one did not necessarily have to leave home to be exposed to the dangers of the periphery; a violator of moral codes could still bring the periphery to themselves. Book Five of the *Florentine Codex* lists all the *tetzahuitl*, usually translated as "omens," that filled the Nahuas with apprehension. Anything that was unexpected or frightening was a *tetzahuitl*, "an anomaly, a rupture of harmony, a little bit of chaos slipping into ordered reality." The cry of a wild animal at night, a wail that sounded "as if a poor old woman wept," could signal an impending death for the person who heard it. Owls with their piercing screeches were particularly ominous. If one cried in the presence of a person already sick, "they said that now he would not issue forth; now we would take our leave of him."<sup>35</sup>

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Sickness caused by the deities was treated with special prayers, rituals and offerings, acts of penitence, and confession. Those afflicted with the skin and eye diseases of Xipe Totec, for example, pledged to participate in his feast day celebrations by wearing the flayed skins of the victims that had been sacrificed at the beginning of the celebration. By wearing the flayed skins, then shedding them, they symbolically took part in the renewal of the "skin" of the earth.<sup>36</sup> People who committed grave offenses such as adultery could cleanse themselves by the rite of confession, although this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Confession was the province of the male/female deity pair, Tezcatlipoca and Tlazolteotl, the gods most associated with sexual violations. Together they had the power to cause sexual transgressions, punish the offenders, and remove the impurities—the *tlazolli*—that adhered to the perpetrator of such acts. Tlazolteotl, the "Filth Deity," governed the domain of "evil and perverseness, debauched living"; such were the things Tlazolteotl "offered one, cast upon one, inspired in one. And likewise she forgave one, set aside, removed [corruption]. She cleansed one; she washed one." In her guise of confessor, she became Tlaelquani, the "Filth Eater," because she ate the sins of her penitents, taking on their filth. After confessing to a human mediator—"the wise one, in whose hands lay the books, the paintings"—the penitents were then instructed to perform

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further rites such as fasting or passing reeds through their tongue, ear, or penis.<sup>37</sup> The Nahuas called this rite of confession *neyolmelahualiztli*, "straightening one's heart," a practice that restored internal equilibrium by returning the heart to its proper place. For the Nahuas this practice was directly linked to physical health. It is interesting to note that the early missionaries adopted this word as a term for the Christian rite of confession. Burkhart notes that in doing so, the friars

not only fomented an identification, in form and function, between the Nahua and the Christian rite, thus aiding in the new rite's acceptance, but also implicitly accepted Nahua concepts of the body and its relationship to morality.

Many of the friars writing in the sixteenth century, such as Mendieta and Motolinía, commented on how well the Indians took to the Christian rite of confession. They confessed frequently, often bringing the sick and lame to confess. No doubt the natives' acceptance of this Christian sacrament had more to do with its perceived curative powers than with the spiritual act of penitence that the friars tried to convey.<sup>38</sup> 22

If deities and other supernatural forms could cause sickness through a bewildering variety of mechanisms, it is not surprising to find that human beings could also bring on illness in others. We have already seen that someone whose liver had taken on a great deal of *tlazolli* by his or her actions also might become infectious to others around them; this was the notion behind *tlazolmiquiztli*, or "filth death," whereby a parent might unintentionally infect her child with the filth that adheres to her from engaging in illicit sexual activity. But some people were capable of inflicting bodily harm in others intentionally. A common name for sorcerers was *tlacatecolotl*, "owl man," a person associated with the night and the underworld, someone who derived his powers from being born on an inauspicious day of the Mesoamerican calendar, such as 1-wind. It was said of such a person that he "had spells to cast . . . he was evil, corrupt, one who deluded, laid enchantments." Sorcerers could attack the body of their victims in a variety of ways: by causing the intrusion of objects—pieces of bone, stones, or sticks—into the body; by "squeezing," "whirling," or "eating" the hearts of their victims; or by attacking the calves of someone's leg so they would have cramps when they walked.<sup>39</sup> 23

Nahuas' bodies then were directly linked to the various supernatural forces operating in this multilayered cosmos. Volatile deities and their earthly envoys lurking in streams and caves punished uncontrolled behavior and ritual breaches with disease. Yet the language of offence and penance, which so thoroughly permeates sources like the *Florentine Codex*, at times puts forth a simplistic image of Mesoamerican religion—one of outraged gods punishing sinners for their disobedience—and can easily mask a more nuanced reading of Nahua culture. People who committed social violations did not simply disobey rules laid down by divine authority; rather, they transgressed critical social boundaries, entering zones of disorder and chaos. Yet such was the nature of the world—its slipperiness, its danger. The Nahuas came to terms with 24

this reality, not by rejecting it, but by trying to live within it. Their method was to foster a value system based on the virtues of moderation, a balancing act between order and chaos. Bodily equilibrium was central to this process.

## Finding Equilibrium

Jacques Soustelle noted long ago that two conflicting value systems dominated Aztec culture, that of the warrior ethic and the ideal of moderation and restraint.<sup>40</sup> The *Florentine Codex* makes this distinction quite clear: the "wicked but brave warriors, those furious in battle" paid their tribute in death, whereas it is "the weepers, the sighers, those who humbled themselves" who are destined to rule.<sup>41</sup> Burkhart dissects this even further; the fiercest and bravest warrior, she writes, "is not so much a moral ideal as a special-function anti-ideal—immorality for a purpose." The opposition in these two ideals parallels the opposition between order and chaos, both of which are inevitable and desirable. In the slippery world of the Nahuas, overindulgence and excess opened one up to all sorts of peripheral dangers, yet its complete absence brought sterility and stagnation; best was to pursue the middle way, to maintain an equilibrium as best as one could.<sup>42</sup> 25

These contrasting values were clearly reflected in Nahua concepts about the body, which depicted health as a state of equilibrium between the human body and the cosmic forces with which it was constantly interacting. Any alteration in the system might manifest itself in bodily changes, producing a loss of balance. This lack of equilibrium was often expressed by Nahua sources as an opposition—or, more accurately, a dialectical unity—between hot and cold, qualities that were applied to a whole range of beings and things in the world. Deities of the upperworld were of a hot nature, a quality reflected in their colors and their attire, while those of the underworld were cold. Human beings, centered as they were on the earth, were an amalgam of the two. The *tonalli*, along with its place of residence in the body, the head, was hot; the *ihiyotl*, and by extension the liver, was colder. Fatigue, brought on by hard work or prolonged walking, heated one up, whereas rest cooled one down; sexual arousal was hot, its gratification cooling. Nahuatl terms that describe activity and rest reflect a hot/cold polarity. The verbs *ceceltia* and *cehuia* mean "to rest" and "to cool what is hot," whereas *tonalcehuia*, "to rest one who walks," literally translates as "to cool down the *tonalli*."<sup>43</sup> Many of the medicines listed by Sahagún's informants were used to heat up or cool down the body. *Chichientic*, an herb with blossoms similar to the amaranth plant, was used for cooling the body after a purge, and a person suffering from diarrhea and fever was advised to eat only cooling foods along with a drink made from the *talmizquitl* root, which reduced the body's heat.<sup>44</sup> The *Badianus Codex* mentions illnesses that were caused by too much heat, notably those located in the heart, head, and eyes, and one in which coldness settled in the abdomen. According to this mid-sixteenth-century text, a person suffering from heat in the eyes should avoid sexual intercourse, the heat of the sun, and eating hot foods or condiments, such as 26

"*chilimoli*," all of which increased heat in the body. The author further advised the sufferer to avoid looking at anything white and recommends various medicines that, once mixed with "woman's milk," should be dropped directly in the eyes.<sup>45</sup>

For diagnostic purposes, the hot/cold paradigm was easily linked to the larger processes playing themselves out in the Mesoamerican universe. Because the hot and cold properties of all beings and natural phenomena were detectable through the use of the senses, native healers had a tool through which they could interpret the mechanism of deities' actions. Depending on who caused an illness, a series of actions were set into motion, producing specific symptoms in the patient, which could then be read by the *títici*, or physician, and explained in terms of internal equilibrium and in changes of warmth or cold. Looking at Mesoamerican medicine through this schema helps us understand why, for example, Nahua healers differentiated between "hot" and "cold" fevers. Those that emanated from a celestial god would manifest themselves as "hot," while those that were derived from actions of the *tlaloques*, the earthly spirits of the *Tlaloque* deity group which lurked in streams and damp mountain ravines, were of a "cold" nature. The historical sources mention various kinds of wind, for example, such as the warm solar or celestial wind, *tona ehécatl*, or the cold aquatic wind, *ehécatl atl*, or the even more frigid airs, *mictlan ehécatl*, emanating from the dark underworld, all of which could shift the body into a state of disequilibrium.<sup>46</sup>

Again, we need to remind ourselves here how closely bodily equilibrium was tied to one's personal behavior. We have seen how sexual excess violated the Nahuas' ideal of moderation, but a whole host of other ideal forms of behavior were advocated as a way to minimize one's exposure to dangerous and chaotic forces. The *huehuetlatolli*, the "discourse of the elders" in the *Florentine Codex*, exhorts caution in all conduct of daily life such as speaking, dressing, eating and drinking. Clearly, these admonitions need to be viewed for what they are: ideals advocated by the ruling class, not accurate representations of how common Nahuas actually lived. Nonetheless, they provide the modern reader with a sense of the value system that helped to shape Postclassic Mesoamerican civilization. A person's form of speaking, for example, should be "moderately, middlingly," taking care "not to speak hurriedly, not to pant, nor to squeak, lest it be said of thee that thou art a groaner, a growler, a squeaker." One should not dress "vainly" or "fantastically," nor "place on thyself the gaudy cape, the gaudy clothing"; at the same time, one should not wear "rags, tatters, an old loosely-woven cape." Overeating and drunkenness both violated social moral codes, although the latter appears to have been a much weightier transgression: intoxication is frequently listed among the serious crimes—"pleasurable living," adultery, theft—mentioned by Sahagún's informants.<sup>47</sup> Indigenous drinking practices also shocked Spaniards who had their own ideals of moderation when it came to alcohol consumption, a topic that we look at in Chapter 4.

The Nahua elders cautioned against eating hastily or excessively. One should not "stir up the pieces [or] dig into the sauce bowl, the basket." So that one does not make a spectacle of oneself, one needs to eat calmly, quietly, not "gulp [food] like a dog."<sup>48</sup> Eating too quickly or

too much was disorderly conduct that associated one with filth and with peoples and beasts of the periphery. One of the terms for glutton was *tlacazolli*, a composite of *tlacatl* "person" and the suffix *-zolli* "old and worn out" from the *tlazolli* complex, the words used to describe forms of pollution. The glutton was someone who aged before their time, reflecting the belief that the *tlazolli* in foods had a cumulative contaminating effect on the body.<sup>49</sup> The abhorrence that the Nahuas felt for such immoderation is clear in this very graphic description of a person who ingests the seeds of the *teopochotl* tree, which cause them to swell up like a glutton:

That which is given as food, that which is given as drink then enlarges his body; it swells; it becomes in no place unblemished. Indeed, he becomes what is called a glutton—very fat, exceedingly fat, lazy, lumpy with flesh, round, an old clod of flesh with two eyes, heavy, very sluggish, a mass of leavened dough, big-headed; with ears like droplets, cylindrical eyelids, contracted eyes, fat cheeks, heavy cheeks, quivering cheeks, *tamal*-like nose, quivering nose, round nose; with thick lips, double chin, multiple chins; with flabby body, with hands like entrails; with filthy fingers, dirt-covered thighs, dirt-covered calves; with thick-soled feet . . . he becomes revolting; he just lies stretched out panting, breathing heavily. He has a great thirst, a great hunger; he eats three times, four times a day. All around he stores [food] for himself, and it is no little amount that he eats. He literally tramples upon the food.<sup>50</sup>

To overindulge in food or drink violated the ideal of equilibrium, as did too much physical comfort or idleness. That such ideals were strongly endorsed in pre-contact society sheds light on the ways in which native elders interpreted the high mortality rate in indigenous communities in the sixteenth century. The natives who served as informants to the Spaniards compiling the *Relaciones Geográficas* repeatedly cited "the greater convenience (*el regalo*)" that life under Spanish rule brought to Mexico as the cause of so much death and disease, a life where people ate too often, ate too much meat and fat, drank too much alcohol, slept on soft beds, dressed too warmly, and had become lazy and idle.<sup>51</sup> To claim that Indians had a life of ease in a postconquest Mexico is of course an absurd assertion; what the elders were lamenting was the loss of a way of life grounded in ideals of balance and moderation.

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Ostensibly, the Nahua medical model, which defined health as a state of equilibrium and charted vital changes in that equilibrium through a mapping of hot and cold qualities, appeared to share basic assumptions about the body with the medical model brought to Mexico in the early sixteenth century by Spaniards. Humoralism, a topic that we explore in depth in Chapter 4, also viewed health as a state of balance, although here the balance referred to the status of the four humors contained in the body; illness occurred when their natural balance was disturbed. The two systems had other similarities. Both were highly holistic, stressing the unity of the body, and the strong interaction between mental and physical processes. And both had similar notions about "ridding" the body of its disturbance, forcing the illness "out," usually through medications that purged. The Sahagún texts show that Nahua practitioners were as adept as their European counterparts when it came to purging, either via the stomach, intestines, or urinary track. Fevers were washed out in urine

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and expelled through the rectum or mouth.<sup>52</sup> Although superficial, such similarities facilitated the assimilation of Hippocratic ideas into Mexican culture. Ridding the body of its disorder through bleeding and purging was a widely used therapy throughout Mexico until modern medicine took hold in the early twentieth century, and even today lay people still refer to hot and cold qualities when discussing the cause of an illness. Yet, as the next chapter will show, the concepts Europeans had about their bodies could not have been more different from those of the pre-Conquest Nahuas.

## Notes

**Note 1:** Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), p. 48; on Mesoamerican cosmology, see Miguel León Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, trans. Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988).

**Note 2:** Burkhart, p. 48.

**Note 3:** Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, *Aztec Medicine, Health, and Nutrition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 55–8; Burkhart, pp. 47–8.

**Note 4:** Ortiz de Montellano, pp. 37–8.

**Note 5:** Burkhart, p. 58.

**Note 6:** López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, Vol. I, p. 162.

**Note 7:** Murray Last, "Non-Western Concepts of Disease," in CEHM, Vol. I, p. 643.

**Note 8:** Ortiz de Montellano, pp. 61–2; Molina and *Relaciones Geográficas*, quoted in López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, Vol. I, pp. 231–2.

**Note 9:** Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and trans. C. E. Dibble and A. J. O. Anderson, 12 books (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950–69), Vol. XI, pp. 165, 171, 175, 188; *The Badianus Manuscript (Codex Barberini, Latin 241)*, ed. and trans. Emily Walcott Emmart (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 249.

**Note 10:** Burkhart, pp. 49, 100.

**Note 11:** Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain, 1629*, ed. and trans. J. Richards Andrews and Ross Hassig (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), pp. 134–6; Burkhart, pp. 95–7; Ortiz de Montellano, p. 152.

**Note 12:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II, p. 199.

**Note 13:** Burkhart, pp. 117–24.

**Note 14:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, p. 175.

**Note 15:** López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, Vol. I, p. 299; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, pp. 142–3.

**Note 16:** Ruiz de Alarcón, pp. 134–9.

**Note 17:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, IV, pp. 91 and VI, p. 257; Burkhart, pp. 110–11.

- Note 18:** Carlos Viesca Treviño, *Medicina prehispánica*, p. 205.
- Note 19:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI, p. 191.
- Note 20:** Burkhart, p. 99.
- Note 21:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, IV and V, p. 111.
- Note 22:** López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, Vol. I, pp. 220–21.
- Note 23:** Ruiz de Alarcón, pp. 161–3.
- Note 24:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, pp. 116–19.
- Note 25:** Ortiz de Montellano, p. 153.
- Note 26:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI, pp. 183, 145, 170, and 174.
- Note 27:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, I, pp. 1–7.
- Note 28:** Burkhart, p. 61.
- Note 29:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, III, pp. 11–12; IV and V, p. 171; I, p. 39; I, p. 31; III, 47.
- Note 30:** Alarcón, p. 157; Viesca Treviño, *Medicina prehispánica*, pp. 80–1.
- Note 31:** Burkhart, p. 59.
- Note 32:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, p. 245.
- Note 33:** Burkhart, p. 60.
- Note 34:** Viesca Treviño, *Medicina prehispánica*, p. 82; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, I, p. 19.
- Note 35:** Burkhart, p. 64; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, IV and V, pp. 151–80.
- Note 36:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, I, p. 39; Ortiz de Montellano, p. 163.
- Note 37:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, I, pp. 23–7 and VI, pp. 29–34.
- Note 38:** Burkhart, pp. 181–3.
- Note 39:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, IV and V, p. 101; Ortiz de Montellano, pp. 140–1; Viesca Treviño, *Medicina prehispánica*, pp. 88–94.
- Note 40:** Jacques Soustelle, "Apuntes sobre la psicología y el sistema de valores en México antes de la conquista," in *Estudios antropológicos publicados en homenaje al Doctor Manuel Gamio* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1950).
- Note 41:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, p. 110.
- Note 42:** Burkhart, pp. 130–4.
- Note 43:** López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, pp. 260–1.
- Note 44:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI, pp. 146, 153, 157, 166.
- Note 45:** *The Badianus Manuscript*, pp. 218, 252, 260, 289.
- Note 46:** Viesca Treviño, *Medicina prehispánica*, pp. 104–5.
- Note 47:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, pp. 87–139, quotes on pp. 122–3; Burkhart, p. 160.
- Note 48:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, VI, p. 124.
- Note 49:** Burkhart, p. 160.
- Note 50:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI, pp. 215–16.
- Note 51:** PNE, pp. 224, 245–6; RG, Vol. VI, p. 88.
- Note 52:** Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI, pp. 142, 143, 149, 153, 159, and 166.