

The Dialectic of Antagonism Between What Seems to Be Disparate More Often Than Not (Poetry and Science): A Study of Selected Illustrative Poems by Monica Ong

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Abstract--Through science represented by shapes of the medical-emotional scenery of personal displacement, Monica Ong explores the cultural silences that outspreading from China to the Philippines as well as North America. Poetry in this sense has been fed by science through using image-poems compared to diagram and diary. Such scientific diagrams represent witness to diminished histories of the body. Ong by doing so, she discharges silence through the lack of language as well as historical eliminator, the loss of cultural retention, restored truths, as well as ghosted personalities. Ong tries to inquire the social hierarchies as well as gender roles of her rearing. Thus by employing certain medical images and drawings like x-rays scans, anatomical drawings to make the poem similar to a visual journey in memory and culture to decide our identities.

Ong through a usage of a visual art as well as poetry which in other words similar to the collaboration between science and poetry into a hybrid form evolves a new way of reading the poem. So what seems to be odd apparently has a connection in a far more deeper level. Consequently her aim was to say that the body is not just a biological body but a way of narration, a narrator that can narrate much in an expressive way.

المخلص

من خلال استخدام العلم متمثلاً بأشكال من المشهد الطبي العاطفي للعزل أو التنحية الشخصية , قامت مونیکا اونغ وهي شاعرة معاصرة , باستكشاف الصمت الثقافي المتفشي في الصين و الفلبين وكذلك شمال أميركا. ونستنتج من ذلك أن الشعر كان قد تغذى على العلم من خلال استخدام قصائد ذات صور و تمت مقارنتها بمخططات ويوميات خاصة بالشاعرة نفسها. أن مثل تلك المخططات العلمية تمثل شاهد على انحسار القصص والتاريخ المتعلق بالجسد. ومن خلال ذلك قامت اونغ بإيقاف الصمت الناتج عن انعدام أو فقدان اللغة كونه يؤدي إلى حذف التاريخ, ويؤدي إلى فقدان الاحتفاظ بالحضارة, واستعادة الحقائق, والشخصيات المغيبة. حاولت اونغ الاستعلام عن التسلسل أو التدرج الاجتماعي وكذلك عن الفروقات في الأدوار الاجتماعية بين الرجل والمرأة منذ النشأة. و لذلك ومن خلال استخدام بعض الصور و المخططات الطبية مثل فحص الأشعة السينية و مخططات التشريح أصبحت القصيدة مشابهة للرحلة المرنية في الذاكرة والحضارة لكي نقرر هوياتنا. قامت اونغ من خلال استخدام الفن المرئي والشعر معا بطريقة تمثل التعاون بين العلم والشعر بصورة هجينة باستحداث طريقة جديدة لقراءة القصيدة. لذلك فإن ما يبدو من خلال ظاهره مختلفا أصبح يمتلك ترابطا بمستوى أكثر عمقا. ونتيجة لذلك كان هدف اونغ هو القول بان الجسد هو ليس جسدا بيولوجيا فقط وإنما طريقة للسرد, قاص يمكن له أن يسرد بطريقة معبرة جدا.

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I. Introduction

As a first look at poetry and science, those two sides of the punitive divide, it seems that poetry and science are basically divergent from each other. Yet if one digs deep into the relation between them, one might find that this relation seems to be disparate more often than not. Scientists are looking for factual things, while poets are critics in the sense that they create things and reflect themselves through them by using their imagination. Scientists are ruthless towards what is beautiful while poets are the opposite of that. There is a sense of a divide between the head as well as the heart, a western civilization. Yet this seems not true. For science helps with its discoveries and inventions a great deal by providing poetry directly with images as well as thoughts.

Furthermore, science might bring destruction to beauty, yet this is to be reimbursed by presenting a truthful fact about beauty which is direct and delicate. Thus truth is strange to what is fictitious. From this point, the detections, comes the imagination where poetry will arise. In this case science moves towards advancement while poetry towards immortality. Thus no one of both conquers the other rather both go hand in hand in the direction of the sanctuary of truth. From this point come the idea that what are supposed to be opponents or odds, are to have many resemblances as Louis Zukofsky, a modern American poet, mentions in his book *Prepositions* "the poet, no less than the scientist, works on the assumption that the inert and live things and relations hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature."¹ Thus the poet employs words in his experiments while the scientist employs something different totally which is cells as well as atoms. Yet they have a resemblance from the point of view of their approach towards the object they study.

Poets as well as scientists crystallize certain suppositions liable to test so that they can prove or abandon a theory. Thus a poet makes a supposition concerning his arrangement of words regarding their expression to his anticipated influence on the reader or not. While a scientist practices an assumption about whether or not he will produce something new invented by him to make a change that is useful and tangible. Concerning both, poets as well as scientists, there is a procedure to be followed which is following an evidence, then admitting that truth might act unconventionally against their wishes. There are certain examples where a scientist's laboratory functions a similar role to the poet's intention. Thus it is a way that both the poet and the scientist seek feedback to their ideas of the natural world through observation and experimentation. Thus, the method to their work is experimental in its attitude. This might be well asserted by what Octavio Paz, the 1990 Nobel Laureate for Literature, mentions in his *Modern Poetry and Science* :

Poets and scientists are not doctrinaires; they do not offer us a priori systems but proven facts. Results rather than hypotheses, works rather than ideas. The truths they seek are different but they employ similar methods to or ascertain them... A poem and a scientific truth are something more than a theory belief: they have withstood the acid of proof and the fire of criticism.²

It is difficult to demonstrate a definite differentiation between both, poetry and science, for there is no exact and definite definition for each. Besides people are inconstant about both. Both of them demonstrate inventiveness, imagination and depiction of understanding through study. However their use of language is different basically. For poetry uses the language as an object in itself, poems are composed of words while in science language is another different tool to measure in a precise, certain and reasonable way. Hence both, poetry and science, can meet with productive results.

Monica Ong, the Guilford Poets prize winner for she has been selected by Joy Harjo as winner of the Kore Press First Book Award in poetry. She is the daughter of a Chinese mother and a Filipino father, and is a visual artist as well as writer who claims more than one country as home. She is the author of *Silent Anatomies*(2015) where she was talking

about the words formed by certain diagrams of medical related to the human body.³ This book of poetry employs in a visual way, certain diagrams, mixed media, ultrasound images, medical textbooks, family photo albums, MRI scans as well as advertisements to express her themes and the attitudes she is after. Thus Ong feeds her poetry with science images and metaphors as well as infused her themes with scientific themes in a way that makes her disband the margins between heart as well as mind. In this volume she is talking about the history of her family as well as feminism. Political matters are also expressed in this volume through digging deep for indications about the meaning of being a woman, Chinese woman, and a Philippines woman. Such a handling expresses her intellectuality to convey her attitudes and intentions with the aid of science. She actually is after what is personal and political as well. This is quite clear through the weave of the scientific diagrams with nerves as well as arteries to embody the idea that history, her history being Chinese and Philippines woman at the same time, runs via her body as well as her blood.

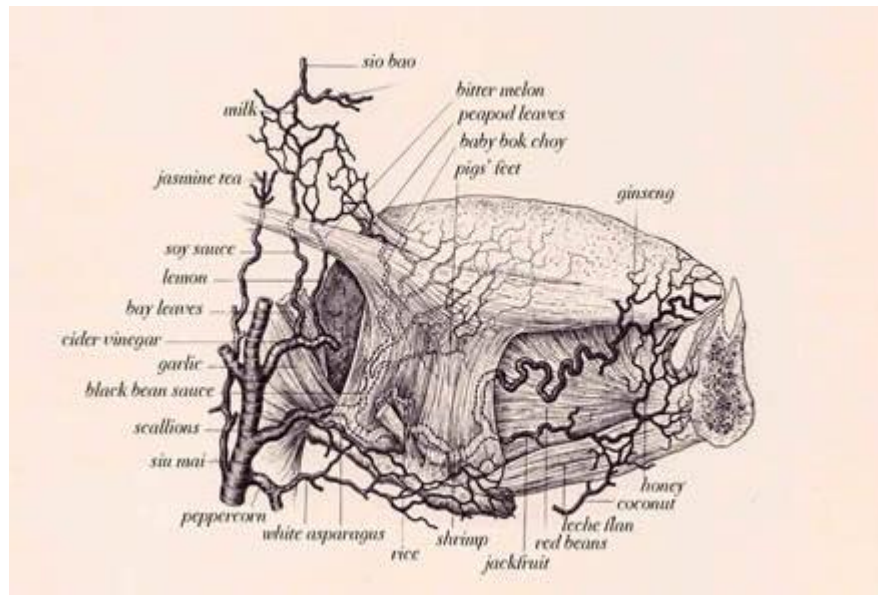
A quote from Susan Howe is to open the collection with, saying: "I wish I could lift from the dark side of history voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate."⁴ which is actually a sum up to the whole collection end and consequently to the poet's attitude. For in this case she is talking about members of her family in general, and women from her family in particular, they are her aunt, her grandmother, unborn female progeny, and her mother. The poems in this volume which is entitled "Profunda Linguae" are scientific diagrams of the muscular structure of the tongue where poems were written in captions illuminated. They talk about certain reminiscences related to meals between Ong herself and her father, she says:

At the table, we do not speak of ourselves,
never learned the words for *daring* or *disappointed*
don't know how to say
I feel,
I'm sorry,
have no idea if you've missed these last few years.⁵

Ong here tries to explain the complexity of feelings she got, especially when one knows that she is an immigrant, for she tries to make a quest about her inheritance whether concerning the past or the future generations, the tongue she is looking for. The medical illustration is strewn with pinpointed text as to what it contains "rice," "siopao," "leche flan," "honey," "coconut." She says

Do you remember those Sundays,
the rolling clatter of dim sum carts,
so steamy next to the sultry walnut shrimp,
and piquant vegetables who were anything with
black bean sauce?⁶

The idea is that taste memories invoke feelings, episodes about people, home or even places that we love and sometimes are lost. It is a feeling of yearning, sometimes soothing other times offensive.



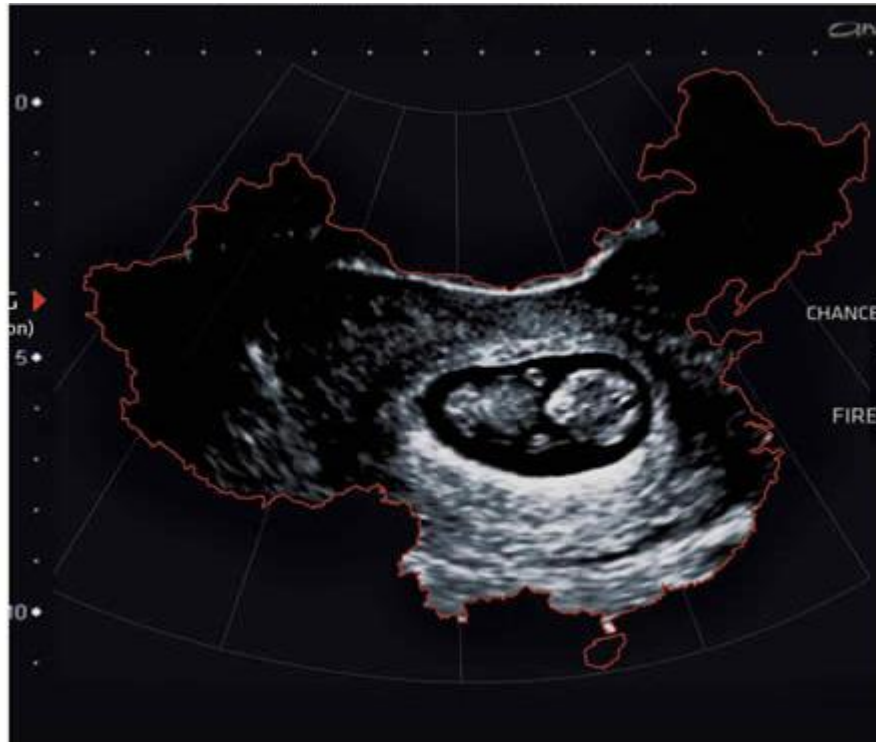
X-ray scans as well as anatomical drawings are rewritten to map identity in addition to elegy, making the reader travel to emotional landscapes or else in clinical spaces. Her series "Catching wave" is inspired by Ong as well as her sister's ultra sound images so that she can argue about the position of girls in Asian culture which is one of the major themes in Ong's poetry saying that " the practice of aborting baby girls (which happens in China and other Asian countries) has altered the gender balance such that there are approximately 124 boys to every 100 girls."⁷To make her idea clear she uses scientific images taking from medicine so that they might illustrate on her idea which is totally not scientific nor medical like imposing the frontiers of China around the fetus with 49% possibility of burial and 51% possibility of fireworks. For when daughters born there is no fireworks, indicating the rejection of this gender. Thus "Catching Waves" is an example where science has been used by Ong to reveal her idea about the deceiving data and the ease handling of the numbers, she says:

Accidents (%)
in pink plastic bags
19
on bare branches
38
fingerslipped
43⁸

Quite clear , in the above quoted lines, that Ong used once more medical idioms together with anatomical drawings external that expresses how experiences as well as convention can stigmatize the body with bruises of the lack of security as well as weakness.⁹in this poem Ong tried her best to bestow the unborn babies, especially girls, with a voice saying:

she longs for a willful tide
that could see her through an entire lifespan.¹⁰

Ong is saying that biologically speaking, men and women, are alike, owning hands , legs , arms, ears, yet remains the question what makes our body parts with less value only because we are females and not males.



This same idea is further emphasized by the "Onset," series where certain medicine bottles are used to show a very sharp criticism to what is done for women, mothers, through impregnating them by giving them potions so that they can reduce the number of daughters to fix the shortage of sons. This action is going to secure the protection of bearing daughters in east Asian countries. This is further emphasized when she intentionally omitted certain body parts as well as the faces to reveal identity loss and neglect.¹¹ This is to say, on the poet's side, how ugly is the way people are dealing with such crucial and important matters in their lives like having a baby letting themselves be tricked to take medicine so that they are going to avoid the "terror of asymmetry" in their children.

Another example in which she reflects oppression practice towards women is in her poem "Bo Suerte" where on a medicine bottle she used a family portrait that has her mother disguised as a boy, and her justification is: "Grandfather was ashamed / He didn't want people shaking their hands"¹² It is truly a very negative attitude that has been imposed on her, the speaker, since her childhood on being a girl, she says: "the fact of five daughters was the immutable kind"¹³ It is something quite familiar in the Chinese families, as if to payback for an "unsavory ancestor in an imperial court"¹⁴ It might be due to the idea that they cannot pay for raising daughters due to their inability to take on family business may be due to their rural background. Thus they rely heavily on number as well as information that affect their decision to make the abortion or not which is a vacant background. This happens aside from their ideology of using pills as "Perfect Baby Formula" that assures "fetal masculinization" This is just to reflect her satirical attitude towards the overwhelming patriarchy in East Asian tradition:-

Mother, each day I look for you. Try to recognize you in soup and sepia.
As it happens in other lives, you come to me in secret.
There were no elegant stairs in your childhood home, and this young woman, the nanny.
Just the way her brows bend with humility.

I easily identify all four of your sisters in their von Trapp dresses,
and both brothers, sporting crisp white linens.
In your absence stands a son, slightly leaning,
toes ablister from your brother's too big shoes.

You tell me Grandfather was ashamed.
He didn't want people shaking their heads, their tongues clicking:
Bo suerte.

Bo, which in Hokkien means without, or not enough.
It does explain the hoarding, I suppose. Dusty magazines stacked into pillars. Grandmother's purse of purloined sporks.
The way your long locks fell like black feathers onto the kitchen floor.

Suerte, is Catholic for karma, cruel as hunger, heavy as stone.
The fact of five daughters was the immutable kind.
Payback, perhaps, for an unsavory ancestor in an imperial court?
Or something during the war that Grandfather never told us?

Hidden like your graceful arms in a brother's long sleeves.
Your boyface gazes at me. I place flowers at your feet, wet with pus.
For the daughter, you, but not only you.

Portrait as battle. The terror of asymmetry. This shortage of sons.¹⁵



In "Elegy" Ong used another scientific image that of an extended arm and wrote on it to express the idea of age for women: " "womanhood tore you" ¹⁴ Right at the beginning of the arm she wrote about the cheerfulness as well as the liberation : "music-spiral. night full of cars. we were girls"¹⁶. But when she reaches to the end of the arm , the poem itself

reaches to its end, for when reaching the fingertips, the gay atmosphere is substituted by a "radio silent pulse".¹⁶ this is only because she comes to realize that there should be an end, everything ends, she says: "the incompatibility of time and tumor".¹⁷

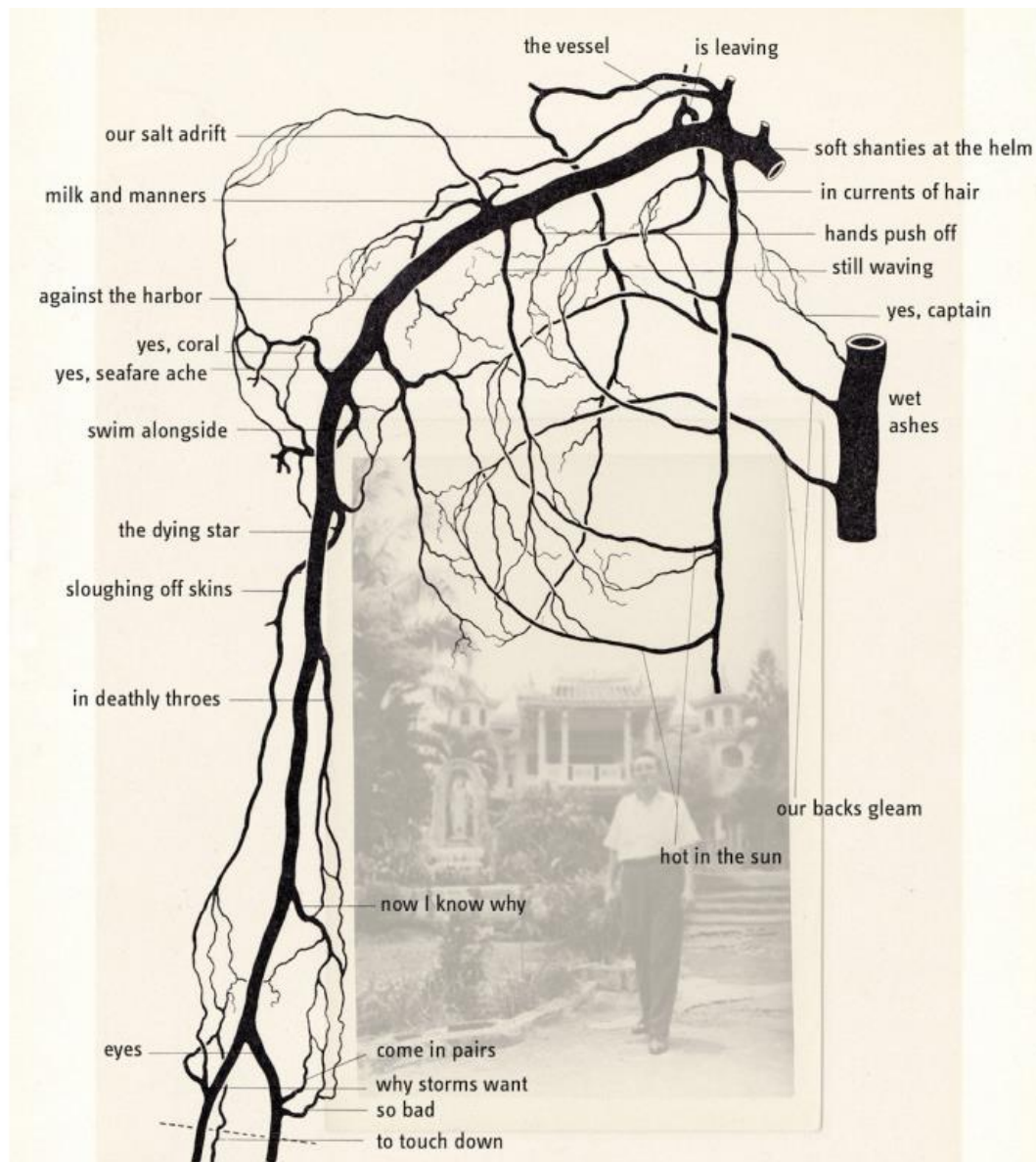
In "Yeong Mae's Oral Whitening Rinse" Ong uses a bottle which is unfilled and the label on it reads "consistent use over a period of four weeks can dramatically improve one's chance of becoming articulate"¹⁸ On the bottle there is a picture of a face of an Asian woman with her mouth covered completely by an inscription on saying "100% English Free" Ong here in this poem tried to reveal the theme of alienation in so far as it is related to the family as well as to the Asian identity that is blockaded by cultural heritage. And at the same time her desire towards assimilation to the Western culture because there is this sense of disorientation she feels. Above all such senses of alienation disorientation are felt also as they related to the body as well as the self. This is further illustrated when the bottle or the medicine in it is made for curing the one's being Asian because Asianness is sought to be illness. So one takes the medicine if he feels ill to cure herself from her Asianness, yet when doing so she participates in subjugation since in doing so she practices injustice towards herself. Thus the aspiration for cure becomes a prejudice against the self.¹⁹ Thus she is trying to warn those women from advertisements that sell poisonous ideas related to race, culture as well as gender because it promise them to be white and having an English which is unaccented.



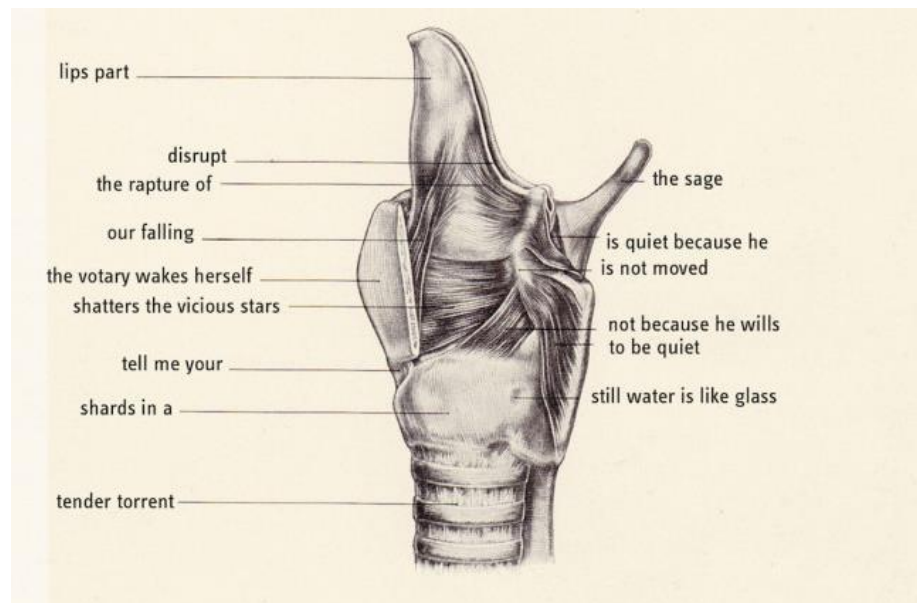
In her "Remedies" she tried to use apothecary in poetry connected with achieve images from her family so that she can question about gender roles as well as suppression in history. So in "Perfect Baby Formula" the photo was that of a baby naked exactly from the waist down. It was a widespread thing at that time, the time of the generation of her parents. This is to indicate that girls birth is to be kept hidden while boys birth is to be announced, consequently this reflects the Chinese culture of feeling shame due to the birth of girls. While in another set from "Remedies" like "Old Timer's Dis-ease," Ong tried to use dictionary entries together with certain images so that she can help showing the loss of memory of her grandmother. The loss of memory here represents the loss of language and the loss of the cultural print. Ong her was

attempting to sustain , name, or even define identity. Intending so, she came to the conscious cooperation between the everlasting memory together with the unavoidable removal.²⁰

So series of apothecary bottles seeks to remedy anxieties about gender, race, and even mental illness, drawing from a fusion of multicultural folklore and belief. With this experimental debut, Ong invites readers into her complex lineage, much of it fading, with the remains collected here as documentation of nomadic heritage, resilience, and quiet devotion.



"The Vessel" is a poem that shows how the connection between past and present and how this burdened past runs through the bare veins and vessels. As it is related to the story of her father and the false name he assumed to himself and to his family.



This illustration is about the larynx which is a diagram presenting the musculature of the throat. Although it is a medical diagram, yet it the labels on it are not the normal ones that explains its parts. Rather on one side of Ong places certain lines that belongs to Chuang Tzu, a Chinese poet as well as a philosopher from the 15th century. On the other side of the diagram Ong places a poem that belongs to her. In relation to both, the lines of Tzu as well as her lines there is a connection that invoke the title of the book, *Silent Anatomies*, best. For both of them are related to silence just as the title is and this is significant to the book as a whole as to the theme Ong is after since this is the first poem in the book. The lines by Tzu are about silence but the kind of silence that comes not from the desire to be silent rather from his inner peace with the surroundings. Thus this is the philosophy of a sage. While Ong's poem on the other side is about certain lyrical words that bursts in a way that smashes the language of the speaker into ruins that appeared to be dreadful and caring she says:

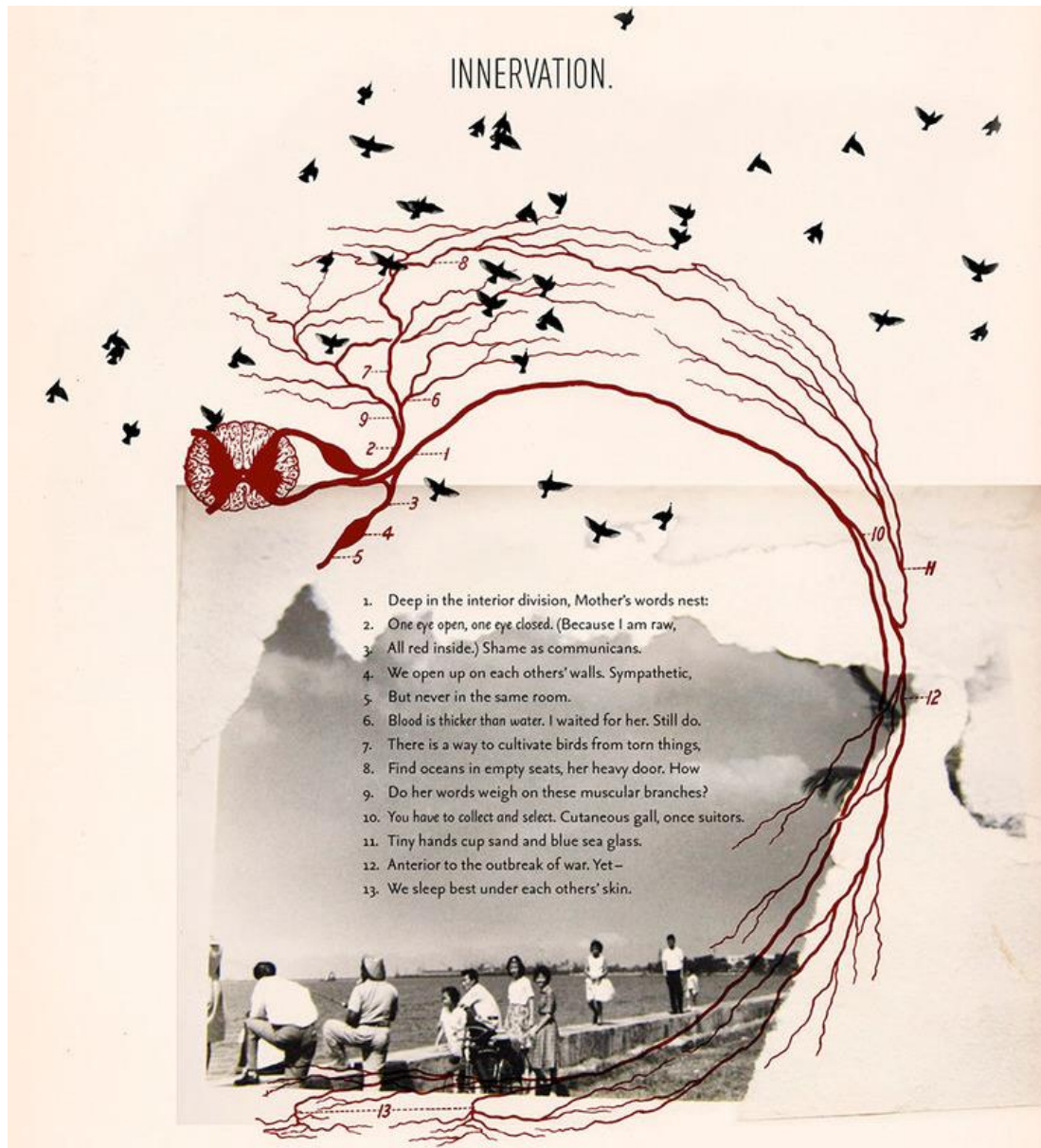
lips apart
disrupt
the rapture of
our falling.²¹

The words of Ong written in a rather smashed way like ruins or "smithereens" ²² instead of a line of poetry. But when reading the lines of both poets together it would be a poem, a whole poem, a readable one into which the words of both run over and join. They would be:

lips apart
disrupt the sage
the rapture of
our falling is quiet because he
the votary wakes herself is not moved
shatters the vicious stars
not because he wills
to be quite

tell me your
still water is like glass
shards in a
tender torrent.²³

Thus the two voices merge together to parallel the calmness in Tzu's voice together with anxiety as well as passion in Ong's. Using this diagram she isolates herself from Tzu and at the same time she links her voice with him across the centuries.²⁴



"Innervation" is another poem that collages with a medical illustration of the intercostal nerve where she employs to the anatomical illustration she uses numbers to its parts, then she puts the poem as a referential indicator. Thus there is a connection between the poem and the illustration. The photo is for her family and not any photo. There are many explanations

in the poem rather than just a medica picture of the intercostal nerve for it might refer to images of birds that is in number one and seven "mother's words nest, " " a way to cultivate birds". It might be a reference to people in number six she says: " I waited for her, "fine oceans," "blue sea glass," or a reference to war " interior to the outbreak of war." The end of the poem have a caption that reads " A dairy of Intercostal nerve" that shows how the illustration is different from what explained in the numbering. This is just to convey the idea that to place a text into an image with sincerity in its combination.²⁵To say that the images as well as the poem's part are so tight in their combination rather than just talking to certain single parts.

A poem with a picture opposite to it entitled "Etymology of an Untranslated Cervix" is an illustration of the pelvis crowded with pines and there is a helicopter . there is a connection between the poem and the picture . The poem is an indication to the picture for there are lines that talks about the illness " a carcinoma colony" which is very much suitable with the shadowy image and the threat that it reflects being an X-Ray. There are also certain lines talking about silence due to the lack of language . Such is quite suitable to the main idea conveyed in the poem. The image is as influential as the poem itself for each is a reflection of the other as well as a background to the other.²⁶

In her illustrative and medica verse, Ong highlighted the Chinese Filipino perspective. She tries to express the conditions of the a special group of people who have been racialized and gendered. This has been presented together with certain ethnical as well as national experiences that weave in a way to make a generalization because it stems from Ong's familial background. It shows her family members together with certain colonial historical references that acts significantly in her poetry. Like the use of beauty form to a lighter skin.

For example, "Onset" is a sequence poem its subject is modified beauty product with certain labels and descriptions below them . So this s to say that she used a footnote at the bottom of the page which is sometimes blank page, so that she can show those whom are gendered as well as racialized. Ong in her "Onset" did so to convey the idea of an absent women, a female gendered body. Thus according to Ong in this poem the woman is present in the absent image of her with a note at the end saying: " There are no fireworks when girls are born. My mother is translating her mother." ²⁷Such poems are about the body and an excess of it trying to show its embodiment via veins, muscles, bones, energy, medical treatments as well as beauty products. Actually the reflect varied ways of expressing the body, scientific, medical, gendered, racial, and national. Such is an expression of the fact that the body is not a mere biological act rather it is narrative. It has a silent anatomy that embody experience and history as well.

Another image is that of her aunt which is placed on a corked bottle of ointment and below it there is a part of a vintage English-Chinese dictionary and a written words from it like:

hers

her-self

he's

hes-i-tan-cy

her-i-tant

hes-i-tate



Then , there is another brief dictionary part, after an image of a bottle and attached to it a picture of a man celebrated by a group of people, beginning “fa-ther-land” and then:

fas-cism

fas-cist

Fa-scis-ti

fa-scis-tic

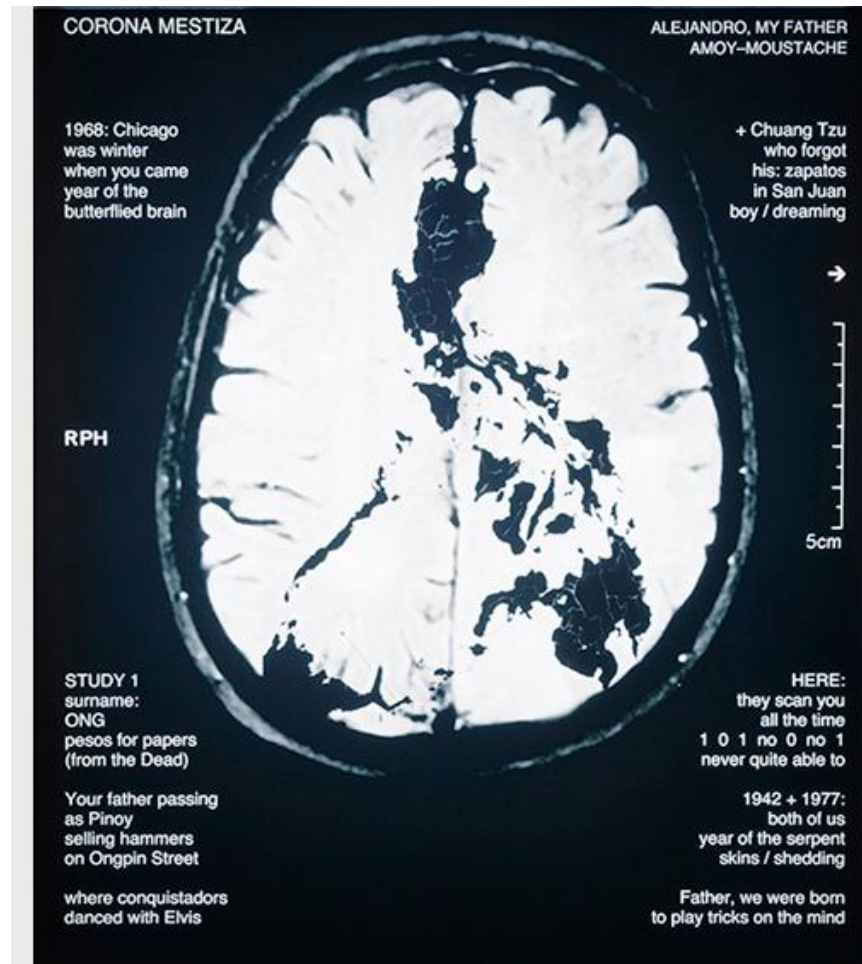
fash

fash-ion

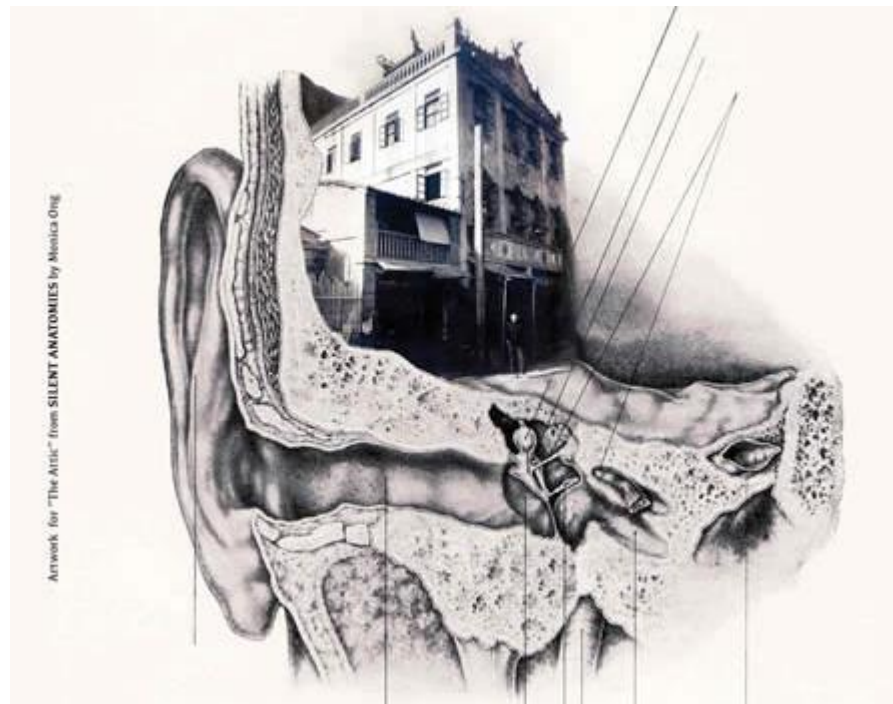
fash-ion-a-ble



Doing so by arranging the poems in this way raises the question of whether the idea of gender in a society is related or not to nationality. Thus by such astounding series with footnotes related to personal reflections on her grandfather, father, mother, with specification to her grandmother; she says "We drift in different dictionaries, often hearing each other second hand."²⁸



"Corona Mestizu" is a poem that depends on a CT-scan trying to discover the mysterious nature of her father. The CT-scan shows the lesions of the brain in which they are based on the Islands of Philippine , the place her father was reared up. Ong attempts to bring close connection between clinical fragments with nomadic history as being a kind yearning , a kind of desire to figure out the origin. This expresses the hardship of finding it. For Ong's father when he immigrates from China to Philippines this demands from him to change his name and travel using another name so he used a name of a dead person assuming Ong . Such has a consequence on the family as dropping part of their history and reinventing a new one. This MRI indicates the loss of the country (Philippines) she says: "Father, we were born/ to play tricks on the mind."²⁹



This illustration is about a poem under the title "The Attic" where there is a combination between a diagram of the middle ear and a picture of the house of her grandfather in his childhood in the Philippine. This is made by her to convey the idea that listening, home, and remembering do form us. She says: "Above your crib, the floorboards creak as I make more room in this attic." The poem has been written to her child, she says: "By the time you are born, what I know of this world will be well on its way to extinction." Expressing the idea of the past heritage and its connection to the present. Through the use of the word "tiah" in the poem and with its multi-significance she can "make more room in this attic" This is because this word is an old word from the Hokkien dialect with the meaning of ache, to listen as well as love. She actually reverberates between a feeling of pain when she hears something about her culture in the past, yet still she still can feel love towards her family.³⁰

Notes

¹Naureen Ghani "Mind and Matter: The Intersection of Poetry and Science" in *The Student Blog*. Posted in January 15, 2016.

²Ibid.

³Miriam Rother, reviewer of *Silent Anatomies*, Monica Ong (Kore press, 2015).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Monica Ong *silent anatomies* (Tucson: Kore Press, 2015) print.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Anita Olivia Koester, "Diagram of a Tongue: *Silent Anatomies* by Monica Ong", January 7, 2018.

⁸Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

⁹Vanlizza Chau, "The Excavation of Mind, Body, And Culture: A Final Engagement with Tributeary and *Silent Anatomies*"

¹⁰Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

¹¹Chau

¹²Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹W. Todd Kaneko A Review of *Silent Anatomies* by Monica Ong (Tucson: Kore Press, 2015) .

²⁰ Randal Horton ed. And etal.TBR, Tidal Basin Review, Washington,DC, 2010 Tidal Basin Press p, 35-6.

²¹Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

²²Kaneko.

²³ Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

²⁴ Kaneko.

²⁵James Elkins, writingwithimages.com

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷ Kenji Liu reviewer of *Silent anatomies* by Monica Ong, September 25th, 2015.

²⁸ Ong, *Silent Anatomies*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Anita Oliver Koester, Diagram of the Tongue: Silent anatomies by Monica Ong, January7, 2018.

II. Conclusion

Ong in her poems in general and *Silent Anatomies* in particular, in an artistic way plays with form as well as language so that she can dig out culture as well as body. For the speaker in the poem is a character who suffers hardships and subjugation in an attempt of giving voice to the voiceless , to the silent. Yet at the end of the book she provides delicate sense of hope although she kept letting the reader searching for a way of emancipation for both, the speaker in general as well as girls in East Asia in particular. Actually it is hope but not a solution, with no call for doing any because the matter is left to the reader to initiate, either to free himself or herself, or to remain caged. Yet it was an attempt to provide the minority with voices that they are mostly in need.

The context she dealt with was Chinese and Filipino and out of this specification she created a more generalized context of gendered as well as racialized subjects. Monica Ong attempts at delving into the depths of the silent selves that might be carried by every self.

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