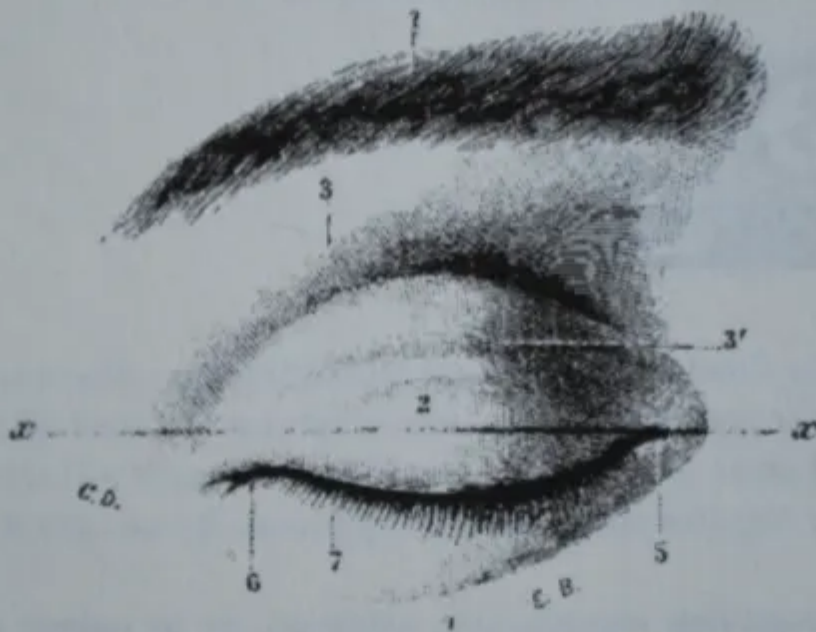


OPERACIÓN AL CUERPO ENFERMO



OPERATION ON A MALIGNANT BODY

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No one deserves cancer.

In his translator's note of *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo / Operation on a Malignant Body* (2019), Will Stockton references Susan Sontag's critiques of the tendency to conceptualize illness as a

metaphor. In *Illness as a Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), Sontag poignantly challenges the victim-blaming that is often found in the language around illnesses and the people whom they infect. She calls on her readers “to see diseases simply as diseases – as nonmetaphorical, disconnected from sin, shame, punishment, and dessert” (Stockton 13). While no one deserves cancer, it can be difficult at best to avoid such metaphors in the daily lived realities of the disease.

Loo and the poetic voice in *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo / Operation on a Malignant Body* cannot simply opt out of language, and the messy metaphors surrounding disease and treatment. After all, as Stockton reminds us, such interactions and communicative exchanges occur across a social web of connections: “There is no way for Loo to represent the experience of cancer without recourse to words that are, at the same time, distinct from the objects and sensations they represent (cells, bones, fear) and intimately bound up with other words in the network called language” (13). Stockton works through the complexities of translating this work from the Spanish for English audiences, cognizant that it is impossible to escape language, and its metaphors. In selecting the term “malignant” for the title, as opposed to the literal translation of “sick,” Stockton moves to “double down on Loo’s own metaphors of unstoppable becoming and isolate a word that is everywhere present but hardly mentioned: malignancy, the growing deadliness that eventually claims the life of the author who unfolds himself (*se desdobla*) in the pages of this book” (15).

The poetic rendering of the fight against cancer in *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo / Operation on a Malignant Body* is based on Sergio Loo’s own, real-life struggle with cancer. Loo was formally diagnosed in 2011, and he ultimately succumbed to complications from the disease on January 28, 2014, at the age of 31. Though his life was cut short, Loo (1982-2014) was a leading Mexican writer in contemporary queer LatinX poetics. In addition to *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo*, which was published posthumously, he was also the author of several poetry collections such as *Claveles automáticos* (2006), *Sus brazos labios en mi boca rodando* (2007), *Guía Roji* (2012), and *Postales desde mi cabeza* (2014). In *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo*, Loo leverages his personal experiences with his cancer diagnosis and treatment to productively explore the relationships between queerness and disability that are constructed through the body, language, and social interactions.

For many cancer patients like poet Sergio Loo, and by extension the poetic voice, surgery is often a component of what is necessarily an aggressive treatment plan against the malignant growth, or growths, threatening to overtake the patient’s body. The cancer that permeates *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo / Operation on a Malignant Body*, an Ewing’s sarcoma in the left leg, makes its way throughout the body of the author, the narrator, and the narrative.

Loo’s collection features short, succinct texts in which the poetic voice attempts to understand what is going on around them, in a world that has become irrevocably medicalized due to their diagnosis. As part of this journey, the poetic voice integrates definitions throughout the text. Some are overtly scientific, such as the definition for Ewing’s sarcoma, whereas other terms are less medical, providing windows into the speaker’s understanding of their newly acquired identity as someone whose life has been affected by cancer. A patient is “one who suffers and one who

endures” (25), and “to be sick is *to be* a sickness: a pleasant vacation from your healthy identity” (31). The cancer is within and separate from the speaker: “...I can’t see the leg they’re about to operate on. It has cancer, a stage-two sarcoma they’re going to remove. I have open flesh. I am open flesh” (21). This duality aside, the cancer is consistently an ever-present actor that guides the action in the poems.

Stockton’s translation features the Spanish on the left, with the English-language texts on the right. By weaving his translations on parallel pages throughout the text, instead of relegating the languages to different sections of the book, Stockton lays bare that translation is another process at work in his rendering of this poetry collection. He writes, “translation is itself a change, a becoming, an act of movement, with the translator, like the original writer, like the reader, like the patient, working to stabilize, if only momentarily, a meaning continuously on the move” (15). Stockton’s work is a much-needed translation that not only makes Loo’s poetry accessible to English audiences, but it also draws attention to the ways that queer bodies and subjectivities uniquely experience cancer and its treatment.

Loo’s poems are not solely about death, but rather the journey of a person attempting to reconcile their relationship with cancer, doctors, loved ones, and the world, which all must be navigated through language, and metaphors, as imperfect as they may be.

Image Source: Title page for *Operación al Cuerpo Enfermo / Operation on a Malignant Body*, by Sergio Loo, translated Will Stockton

Works Cited:

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