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OTHERWISE TASTES

SECTION THREE



Alternative Empirics

MATHEW ARTHUR

Since the dawn of allopathic medicine, surgeons have cut open bodies to learn about and repair anatomy and function, privileging distinct, identifiable organs and visible bodily structures as sites of discovery about disease. They would aggressively cut through and rip out the fascia or connective tissue and toss it for disposal on the operating room floor. All because a way of seeing and valuing was maintained in a set of practices, including medical education textbooks, anatomical drawings, surgical tools and procedures, and so on. Now we know that the fascia are like the mycorrhizal layer of the forest floor that sends signals and nutrients between trees. Fascia communicates with organs, holding the body together, supporting and protecting its complex balance.

Traditional Chinese Medicine, largely seen as a “complimentary” approach by Western biosciences, has understood this kind of affectivity for millennia—without complex medical imaging technologies, through careful multisensory observation, and through touch. The difference between Western and Chinese medicine is the distinction between examination or “yàn” and pattern or “lǐ” (馬光亞 [1998] in Law & Lin 2014). The examination looks at everything in the greatest detail (think of electron microscopes, for example) while, by contrast, Chinese medi-

cine is all about patterns accumulated from experience (like different rhythms or tones of pulse). Unlike Western anatomical drawings, Traditional Chinese medical charts are not read as a realist, one-to-one rendering of visible objects, but rather as a symbolic map for ongoing knowledge acquisition in the face of constant change. When we decenter our own units of measurement, conceptual terms, and ways of representing, we're forced to pay attention to shifting relationships.

Similarly, Blackfoot theorists Leroy Little Bear and Ryan Heavy Head observe that mainstream Western knowledge practices are anatomic at base, targeting the “consistent composition and behaviour of solids within solids” (2004). But there are other ways to move with matter, other registers of practice that hatch forms of anticolonial resistance. Otherwise Tastes, our series of critical herbalism and fermentation workshops explored alternative empirics. Instead of taking technology as high-tech and high-definition, we looked to subtle qualities of light, touch, tone—the particular effervescence of a ferment, the warming or cooling attributes of herbs. Instead of dissective and extractive anatomies, we used scent, taste, colour, palpation, and other so-called surface modes of appraisal that blur where bodies start and end.

REFERENCES

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