Ars Poetica: A Conversation with Wendy Chin-Tanner

LEAH ZANI
Lead Poetry Editor

Introduction

We are proud to introduce Wendy Chin-Tanner as the inaugural poet for our new Ars Poetica conversation series on art, craft, theory, and method at the intersection of poetry and anthropology. Beginning with the publication of her first book of poems, *Turn* (Sibling Rivalry Press 2014), Wendy Chin-Tanner has crafted a distinct style of poetry that mixes poetic syntax, line, and rhyme with social theories of race, gender, and identity in contemporary American culture. Chin-Tanner holds degrees in Sociology and English Literature from Cambridge University, specializing in race theory and discourse analysis. In her most recent poetry collection, *Anyone Will Tell You* (Sibling Rivalry Press 2019), she develops a unique poetic form composed of triplets—each three short lines listening, in some poems yearning, toward the negative space of the page.

Leah Zani: You have degrees in Sociology and English Literature from Cambridge University, where you also taught sociology. How did you arrive at this meeting point between literature and the social sciences?

I started writing poetry in high school and got some early recognition, so it was my Plan A to become a poet. I continued writing poetry during my BA/MA in English literature at Cambridge, and after a poem of mine was selected for publication in *The Mays Anthology* of Oxford and Cambridge, I was approached at the reading by a literary agent. I was extremely green and just so thrilled to be asked that without hesitation I started working with him on a screenplay. My script had Asian American protagonists, which made it, according to the agent, unsellable, and I understood that if I did not change it or quickly write something else, this partnership was not going to work. I neither changed the script nor wrote a new one, and having let what I thought was my golden opportunity slip away, I suffered a total loss of confidence in my creative writing ability and didn't write another word for ten years.

Attempting to navigate the literary industry as a young woman of color without mentorship, I was unprepared for the obstacles that I faced and rather than appropriately attributing what happened to systemic racism and misogyny (not to mention classism and ageism), I internalized it as a personal failure. This is what I now know to be a classic example of marginalized experiences in oppressive systems, but I certainly didn't know it then. In the meantime, I needed a Plan B. Academia seemed like a good fit, but instead of going back to the English

faculty, I decided that I wanted to do something that was rooted in the world beyond the text. Since I had fallen in love with postcolonial theory, film theory, and feminist theory in undergrad, sociology was the obvious choice. As much as I enjoyed my years in grad school and teaching undergrads as an academic supervisor, sociology is what ultimately wound up bringing me back to poetry by granting me a clear understanding of my lived experience at a time when I was reckoning with my complex family history and impending parenthood. As a writer and a thinker, I am heavily influenced by Bourdieu, Fanon, Lorde, hooks, Said, Foucault, Auerbach, and Turner (on liminality). Their social theoretical work is part of the prism through which my poetic work finds expression.

LZ: At what point did you realize that your poetry practice and your sociology practice were related? How do you see this relation (between poetry and sociology) now, after two books?

Right around the time that I was ready to publish my first collection *Turn*, I began to observe some aspects of the poetry world that were curious. By applying a production of culture-based perspective, my sociology training enabled me to think through the hegemonic biases of ideas like aesthetic value and other discourses of the "literary industrial complex." This helped me on both the production end in terms of content, story, and craft, and on the business end to question the relations of power operating in the literary field and my positionality as a woman of color of a certain age and class within it.

After two books, I think I can say that my writing philosophy stands on the foundation of two core principles derived from the intermingling of poetic and sociological practice: the grounding of universal experience in specificity and understanding the self through the other. It is my hope that these principles in my work foster a writing process and oeuvre that are grounded in empathy and reflexivity. Considering how universal experience can be rooted in specificity creates concrete anchors for the exploration of more abstract universal ideas. At the same time, it opens up a dialogue with the reader that is reminiscent of the act of transference in psychoanalytic theory, a technique that enables the unlocking of the co-constructive potential of poems where the author's text opens to a projection or set of projections by the reader.

Grounded in my training in social and literary theory, the principle of engaging with the self through an examination of the other that makes use of Shklovsky's (1998[1917]) method of estrangement that is, "making the strange familiar and the familiar strange," to foster an understanding and practice of the multiplicity of identities.[1] Because this is, in sociology, a key methodological tool for building self-reflexivity in analytical practice, when it is applied to creative writing, it helps to awaken empathy and a consciousness of the text as a dialogue with the reader. The use of persona, for example, enables the poet to access parts of their own identity and psychology while speaking in the voice of an "other," adding multilayeredness to a poem. I engage in persona poetry as a useful tool in autobiographical writing that explores the self in other worlds and other selves.

LZ: In your book, *Anyone Will Tell You*, your two poems "On Truth in a Nonmoral Sense" and "On Truth in a Moral Sense" are linked by a quotation from Nietzsche. The quotation is a kind of chiasmus, a hybrid cross, that puts

the two poems in relation to each other via a process of change. Nietzsche becomes the framing theory for reading the two poems. Or at least, that's how I read them! How do you use social theory in your poetry practice: At what point in your writing does theory enter a poem?

The Nietzsche became a talisman, a touchstone for navigating the experiences depicted in the poems: family secrets, lies, stigma, shame, trauma, and the reasons for them. In a world that feels ungrounded, it has always been soothing to me to find a framework for accommodating multiple realities. I recently read a sociology paper by Ashley Barnwell on the "slow violence" of family secrets (2019). This is a concept coined by Rob Nixon (2013) that is normally applied to environmental pollution but is also an apt metaphor for the intergenerational impact of secrets and lies. My family life is extremely complex and fraught with legacies of immigration, institutionalization, disease, addiction, and sexual and domestic violence. I am continually trying to unpack what is dysfunction and what is culture, and social theory helps me keep tabs on the moving parts of culture, gender, class, institutions, and systems.

Theory often bookends my writing process. Sometimes a piece of theory will match a narrative idea, and this pairing will spark images, feelings, and sounds as the two distinct modalities of thought rub up against one another. Other times, I realize after I have written a poem that a piece of theory might add nuance or structure to it so that its introduction becomes an organizing principle or throws aspects of the poem into relief.

LZ: I want to focus in on one of the poems in that pair: "On Truth in a Nonmoral Sense." In that poem, you write:

> **In sociology, we say** *mapping*,
>
> **we say** *cartography* **instead**
>
> **of** *understanding*

These lines have stuck with me—I am still thinking about the difference between understanding and mapping. How do you practice these different ways of knowing? What role does poetry play in understanding or mapping the human experience?

Understanding is the presumption that something remains static in one's knowledge of it, a finished act, which places it in in the past, but mapping allows for the fluidity and multiplicity of truth to exist, making space for the integration of new information over time in a dynamic process that continues to occur in the present. It is a form of intellectually "holding space" for an idea and ultimately for oneself. It is a form of intellectual compassion and openness, and poetry has the ability to embody in both form and content, and in the frictions between the two, this kind of fluidity of feeling, sound, visual experience, interpretation, and meaning.

LZ: And later in this same poem, you write:

> **We should never say**
>
> *truth*. **What is the truth anyway? Instead,**
>
> **we should say** *subjectivity*, **as in:** *To what*

are we subjected? **Or:** *What is the subject*
of the story of your life? **To name it,**
I say *loss*, **I say** *yearn*, **I say** *tell me*

This is tricky business: talking about subjectivity, in the academic sense, in a poem written for a general reader. What poetic work is this theory-laden word, subjectivity, doing in this poem?

Here I engage in wordplay, allowing for the academic understanding to become transported and transmuted by emotion into a primal engagement with the notion of the father, the patriarch(y), and origin (racial, ethnic, cultural, familial). There is an act of slippage, which circles back to the notion of the power of story, imposing and allowing narrative and meaning making, in the imperative, "Tell me." Telling becomes both a plea and a practice.

LZ: You have described your first book as a "memoir in verse" exploring your experiences of race, gender, and class as a daughter of immigrants. Why did you choose to write in verse instead of in narrative prose, as in a typical memoir? What does poetry add to your writing about race and other social issues?

Because my engagement with the material that became the contents of *Turn* sprung from the act of giving birth to my first child, during which the urge to write reemerged, I experienced the writing process as the poetic form insisting upon itself. This gives credence to the notion that poetry is a primal form of language that begins, as W. S. Merwin (Morrison 2014) asserts, "to say something that cannot be said," and is, therefore, able to engage with culturally "unspeakable" topics such as trauma and abuse. I hear my projects first, and when I tuned in to the frequency of that book, what I heard was verse. When it came to shaping the poems into a narrative, I realized that part of the internal drama could be reflected in the conflict between form and content—the drive to clarify, unpack, and label as represented by social science versus the subjective, circular, raw, messy, murky world of memory, dreamscape, rage, grief, and desire. So the book's three-part structure corresponds both to the three stages of my life and the three stages of Hegel's dialectical materialism. When I apply the notion of dialectical materialism to my personal experience, it becomes a metaphor for how I began my life with my family of origin, reacted in antithesis against it, and then came to a resolution where the synthesis allowed me to begin the growth cycle again. Hopefully, the cycle is spiraling upwards. Structuring *Turn* in this manner was my way of fulfilling Auden's definition of poetry as "the clear expression of mixed feelings" (1941:119).

LZ: The social sciences are going through a period of re-assessing our relations to society: how our work is funded, published, and for what audiences. For early-career scholars like myself, the where and what and why of writing are all open questions. I want to step back with you and take a look, together, at the wider social context of being a researcher-poet: What do you think our poems do in the world?

I deeply subscribe to the notion that "words make worlds." The power of this is paramount when we consider propaganda, for example, but it is also true about narrative and storytelling. Storytelling is how human beings make

meaning of themselves and the world around them, and it stands to reason that new narratives are capable of shifting those meanings and driving concrete change.

I see my work as part of a cultural project and political struggle to achieve narrative plenitude, as articulated by Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018), from an anti-racist intersectional feminist perspective. The poet's individual world is a prism through which we see the universal, and in my case, that prism happens to be Chinese American, Jewish, and female. I don't shy away from race or gender, but at the same time, I chafe at reductive classifications. I like to think of my poetry, which is to say the cultural sensibilities, sounds, and tropes underlying my work, as quintessentially American, and I am very tired of the caught-between-two-cultures narrative. It's a vicious cycle of what seems to sell and what writers feel compelled to produce as a result. Who gets to speak? Who gets to make art and be paid for it? Who gets to be read? What discourses are reproduced in what is published? Who defines what American means? These are perennially important questions in a culture that is neither post-racial nor post-gender. But I do sense that there is more space nowadays for a wider, more non-essentialist range of expression, for the multiplicity of voices out there to be heard. To that end, my project as a poet is to disrupt conventional and received narratives in a way that is covertly political and overtly subversive.

Note

1. Shklovsky, a Russian Formalist, theorized estrangement as a distinguishing feature of poetic language in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique." This and other concepts from Russian Formalism were later taken up by Levi-Strauss as part of Structuralism.

References

Auden, W. H.
    1941   *New Year Letter*. New York: Faber and Faber.
Barnwell, Ashley
    2019   "Family Secrets and the Slow Violence of Social Stigma." *Sociology*, May. Accessed 15 September, 2019. Electronic document: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038038519846443.
Merwin, W. S.
    2014   "Pat Morrison Asks: The Poet, W. S. Merwin." *Los Angeles Times*, March 18.
Nguyen, Viet Than
    2018   "Asian-Americans Need More Movies, Even Mediocre Ones." *The New York Times*, August 21.
Nixon, Rob
    2013   *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Shklovskii, Viktor
    1998[1917]   "Art as Technique." In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, pp.8–14. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.