

In Interview: Shin Yu Pai and Renée Rossi

Jennifer Bartlett: Define mentorship, from your own perspective.

Shin Yu Pai: I think of mentorship as a two-way relationship between someone who is more experienced in their field of practice and someone who is at an earlier stage of their development upon the same, or a similar path. That sounds both abstract and boring so let me reframe that...

I can name only one poetry mentor in my life who I think would be semi-comfortable with describing our relationship in those terms. I worked with the poet and Sanskrit translator Andrew Schelling while attending the Naropa Institute in the late '90s. I was drawn to Andrew's work in translation and the literary journal form. While still a student at Naropa, I published my first chapbook of Chinese translations *Ten Thousand Miles of Mountains and Rivers*. Andrew wrote the intro for the collection and helped me rethink the sequence of that work. Though I left Naropa in 1998, I stayed in touch and over the years the mentor-mentee relationship has grown naturally into a relationship of colleagues.

Andrew helped me shape my first full-length collection *Equivalence* and prepare that book for publication – but even before the manuscript was accepted for publication – he gave me some critical advice around publishing and contests, advising me that entering book contests was like “looking for love on the street.” I took that advice to heart and have gravitated primarily towards independently produced projects with a more DIY approach.

In my early career, Andrew was a strong advocate of my work and included me in some of his editorial projects – for example, an anthology on North American Buddhist poetry put out by Wisdom Publications. He also included me in a broadside printing project organized by the Harry Smith print shop at Naropa. He's written me countless letters of recommendation – most recently, to help me return to school for doctoral studies in anthropology.

As I've gotten further along the path, it's been important to me to honor that assistance and support. When Andrew's book *Tea Shack Interior* came out, I took advantage of the occasion to interview him for *Rain Taxi*. While working at the Dallas Museum of Art, I coordinated a series of speaking engagements for him in Dallas. When I sat down recently to organize a reading of Buddhist poets for the Rubin Museum of Art in New York, I curated the event with Andrew in mind. I've taught Andrew's poetry in my creative writing classes, and I know that he's also been a strong advocate of my book *Equivalence* in his own teaching.

In the last year, we've begun to write poems together long-distance through highly structured schemas which we agree upon and pass back and forth for several months at a time. The resulting poems are quite different from my own

work and it's a writing experiment that keeps me thinking.

My experience of mentorship has been as a highly organic and changing process – one that is framed by mutual desire, interest, and investment. In theory, a mentorship relationship would be rewarding for both individuals, with give and take flowing in both directions.

Renée Rossi: Mentorship, from my perspective, is a collaboration between two individuals, one of whom is more experienced in some facet. What's wonderful in a poetry mentorship is the collision of two creative minds and the resultant creative energy.

JB: Can you talk about how you met and how you and Renée came together? What 'clicked'?

SYP: Renée and I met through the Writers Garret CAMP mentorship program. I had already left Dallas for Boston but was contacted by the Garret shortly after my relocation. They needed a volunteer mentor for Renée who had already worked with the majority of poets in the Garret program. I hadn't read any of Renée's work, but was intrigued by Renée's background as a medical doctor. She had also done some work in painting and the visual arts, which is a particular interest of mine. I agreed to the mentorship and we structured a semester-long program where we connected about once a month over the phone and in between those sessions by email. I usually looked at 3-5 poems at a time, made reading suggestions, and gave an occasional writing prompt. When I went back to Dallas for a visit in 2004, I met with Renée in person and we looked at building a strong portfolio of her work for the Vermont College program which she was applying to. She graduated from that program this summer.

RR: I had asked for a woman mentor. This was an exciting and beneficial mentorship for me, in that Shin Yu is a highly focused, creative, bright, and innovative woman. It was such a plus to have that infusion of energy and spirit in the relationship! This was also refreshing because it put me in touch with a side of myself that had no time for this kind of creative exploration at that time in my life (I was involved in the rigors of surgical training until I was 32, just about the age Shin Yu is now). In addition, Shin Yu has openly shared her process with me. For instance, she collaborates with others on ekphrastic projects, is interested in translating the visual into words, and in her work on the love hotels, she explored the theme(s) of exploitation and humanity, something of which I am drawn to and explore in my own work. Though we come at this from very different angles, we are both very much interested in the human condition. I'm very grateful that Shin Yu did this mentoring voluntarily: she was not reimbursed. That, in itself, creates a very honest and candid relationship between artists. There is no ambiguity, no questioning of whether one is holding back honest criticism. She has also been incredibly generous in sending

submission calls for poetry journals that she thinks might be a good match for some of the themes in my work. After Shin Yu moved back to Dallas, she became involved in a monthly women's poetry group where we share our work. She has recently moved to Seattle and is pursuing her anthropology work, but we remain in touch and share ideas.

JB: Renée, I am interested to hear about your experience at Vermont College. I went there too! I feel the school is fashioned after a mentoring relationship, how did you feel about this? Did this style work for you? What were the positives/negatives? Are you still in touch with any of the teachers?

RR: I enjoyed my time at Vermont College. It was an absolute privilege to be in such a creative and inspiring environment. You're talking to someone who is a product of academia—it wasn't until I took some creative writing courses in the 90s that I really felt like there was this creative writing thing out there.

VC is, in my opinion, fashioned after a mentor/mentee relationship. One of the positives is having the opportunity to select your mentors. After the first residency, you have a pretty good idea of who you'd like to work with. I felt I was in the driver's seat and the mentors were driving along with me, keeping me on the road but certainly allowing me to pass on the curves. I felt that I fit in there in some inscrutable way. I am very interested in perception, how it shapes us, how it informs our art. This kind of exploration required combining neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, poetry...you name it. I was working with Ralph Angel and he was open to an exploration that was multi-dimensional. If I had done this MFA twenty-five years ago, I don't think I would have had these insights. I probably wouldn't have had much to write about twenty-five years ago, either!

I worked with Ralph, David Wojahn, Natasha Saje and Roger Weingarten and I can honestly say all of them were seasoned mentors, and realized the importance of perceptual and experiential differences and entertained these aesthetic differences in others' work. This doesn't mean they weren't exacting. Natasha Saje introduced me to good language poetry and a number of great women poets. David Wojahn worked with me on the nuances of balancing form and content.

Per your last question, I just obtained my MFA from VC but I have heard from several of my mentors since that time.

JB: How does a mentorship that is structured by an academic program feel different from one that happens organically?

RR: At VC, I was able to choose mentors, although there was less flexibility in the first and second semesters. I'm not sure I've ever experienced a real "organic"

mentorship ever in my life...that is, if you mean the type where someone takes you under her wing after recognizing something about your work or aspirations. I've done some volunteer mentoring/coaching with younger children in Destination Imagination, a creative approach to problem solving where grade school children write scripts and poetry, perform, etc. I've found this to be an ideal way to support the creative process without any personal gains (e.g. financial or career enhancing)... for me, this has been the closest I've gotten to an organic type of mentorship.

JB: Shin Yu writes about her own mentor being Andrew Schelling. Renée, why did you request a woman poet-mentor and has this helped you relax in a way that you might not with a male? Do you believe issues of gender, age, race, or disability might inform a match for two poets?

SYP: To address issues of “compatibility” – ten years ago, there were a very limited number of female teacher-mentors who understood the intent and positionality of my work as an Asian-American female writer, or who were even available to me within the institutional structure. Elise Paschen, a poet of Osage heritage, was a trustworthy and generous reader of my work during my time at SAIC; but within the academic vs. community-based structure, there is such a high rate of student turnover and demands upon one's energies and time that it can be difficult to sustain these relationships over the long-term. The cultural landscape of the programs I attended and the poetic communities in which I participated were distinctly lacking in certain aspects of diversity. Which is NOT to say that compatible teachers were nowhere to be found. But I think there is now a sea of change happening in higher education where faculty of color from varied backgrounds are augmenting the traditional white male authority and increasing in prominence and visibility to more accurately reflect the student populations they serve.

There was a time in my life when I believed that a *real* mentor would look like me, come from the same ancestral genotype, have known the same oppression and stereotyping that comes with being an Asian-looking woman in America. In grad school this mode of thinking and relaxing of boundaries was deeply damaging and made me vulnerable to recruitment by another writer's own political and personal agenda – agendas which were dangerous and contrary to my own sensibilities and approaches to issues of race and inequality. Returning to school after a fruitful and lengthy hiatus, it's become clear to me that the most critical factor in a mentoring relationship is the ability of the mentor figure to continually interrogate his/her experience of positionality/privilege in the world, alongside their commitment to service. I also see these qualities as applicable to the colleagues and community with which I would choose to align myself.

A humanist approach has always resonated for me more than any feminist orientation. I am lucky to have experienced altruism in my mentoring

relationship with Andrew, which has helped to balance other more problematic experiences in my career with women and men alike; gender, age, and race have not placed any greater or lesser premium on that relationship.

RR: I am a humanist, basically, and I wanted to work with both male and female poets equally. I asked for a female poet in the CAMP Program to maintain that balance — having a balance of female and male mentors reflects what is naturally part of us in the wholistic sense. To be honest, I've been around all kinds of “guts and gore,” and in the final analysis, it is what most binds us together, what is common to all of us in our journeys that is most important... we come into the world alone and we go out alone. There are certain physiological experiences that men and women will never share, though, for instance a menstrual cycle or childbirth. Men also may not share the cyclical changes in creativity that come with the hormonal surges around our cycles — we are physiologically different and this is borne out by brain research. This even goes back to the ancient Vedic sciences where the left side of the body represents the feminine side and the right side the masculine. Sometimes, this is even represented in a person's physique or physical ailments, that is, in a right/left schism in an illness. Interestingly, breast cancer has a laterality in that it is more common in the left breast, the female side of the body, and this may reflect what is sometimes being suppressed in our culture, the feminine! I will say I didn't have any female mentors as a surgical trainee and found that I was often speaking out not only for myself but also for female patients when I was around my male surgical colleagues. So, I think the presumption that one would relax more with a female mentor is a disservice to all of us.

JB: I am interested in how (both) your 'other' work, medical and visual, fits into your own poetry and your relationship. My own mentor, Nathaniel Tarn, was an anthropologist. He writes of attempting to set aside his desire to be a poet for the sake of practicality. Did either of you go through a similar process? Renée, how did you make the journey from medicine to poetry?

SYP: Renée and I are similar in that we both have a history of exploring diverse artistic interests (painting for Renée, music and photography for me) and a quality of each being a “jack-of-all-trades” while having an abiding commitment to poetry. At the moment, I study anthropology, a field which seems to stand at the border of humanities and social sciences. Having taken a heavily aesthetic, studio-based approach to my previous education, I am filling in gaps in my schooling and acquiring methodological tools, which I hope will help me to examine my interests with greater scientific objectivity. These interests and experiences inform my poetics in a way that I think of Renée's work in medicine as being deeply interwoven within her writing.

While poetry has its impracticalities, it has always been more gift than burden; a relationship with desire that has been deeply rewarding, with the opportunity for

consciousness-changing transformation.

RR: Poetry and medicine seem a very natural pairing for me. I don't really see a dualism in my "other" work and my poetry and it never seemed a journey from one field into the other. I have always had the natural instincts for both service and art but realized at an early age, for practicality's sake, that I would have to support myself through school and training and knew that visual art or poetry would not be a reliable source of income if I wanted to be independent. I did this by working in a variety of chemistry, biochemistry and genetics labs, never questioning that I would be a scientist. I remember keeping a journal throughout my medical training, writing anecdotes and such, but I didn't have the stamina or time to create much art during my medical school and residency years.

I experience poetry as the way one translates life experiences into art and it would only seem natural then to me to write poetry, to create art, that translates those experiences through my own processes. I think very much of the holocaust poet Paul Celan who, in some way, translated his experiences of the holocaust into art. One of the very interesting and exciting parts about the field I was trained in (Otolaryngology=Ears, Nose, and Throat surgery) is the study of the senses...smell, touch, hearing, taste, and even, by proximity, vision. Most of us are visual dominant, although some are more auditory dominant, and so on and this affects greatly the way we experience the world. We also attach different values to our qualia (sensory experiences) and I find this very much informs both how we read and write poetry in a translational sense. If I hadn't been an Otolaryngologist for years and hadn't studied these processes, I don't think I could have had this insight. I also think very often about the seed and soil in medicine...we call the "seed" the illness in modern medicine and are always developing new ways to kill the seed where it really is the soil that determines if the seed will germinate and take root or not! The same goes for a poem, really...there is an experience, or an idea that is the seed and the soil is what supports the seed (or not)...the soil could be the writer's use of craft and revision work, her audience, and the intersection of her qualia with that audience, etc. I find in our culture, we tend to alienate ourselves from death, to compartmentalize it, and this is perhaps the basis for some of our current antipathy toward healers. I can't compartmentalize these experiences, and part of my life work is to embrace death as much as the creation of life. In fact, my practice as a surgeon has been very humbling. It took me years to develop enough confidence whereby I didn't go home every night thinking I might have inadvertently killed someone that day. Although I don't think I've ever killed anyone with one of my poems, the possibility does exist!