A Teaching Guide

for

Wider than the Sky by Nancy Chen Long

created by Callista Buchen, with addendum by the author

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Writing Prompts inspired by *Wider than the Sky*

- Write a poem about a book from childhood that was especially meaningful to you or has an image or line of text that has stuck with you. (See the poem "Dulce Domum" for an example.)

- Inspired by poems like "Learning to Barter with God the Way My Mother Barters with the Fishmonger Over Yesterday's Spoils" and "Learning to Read and Write," write a poem with a title that begins with the word "Learning." Make the poem a narrative of one specific scene, relying on detail, and avoid naming the lesson learned in the body of the poem.

- Write a poem that interrogates a memory you have you know to be unreliable—what about the memory are you unsure about? Let the poem lean into and even investigate that uncertainty. (See the poem "Memory Reel" for an example.)

- Using poems such as "Memory Reel," "Hiding the Mojave Desert," "Cataract," and "Altered State at the Grocery Store" as inspiration, take an abstract experience or emotion and make it embodied. In your poem, explore the physicality of the feeling, how the body creates and operates it. How does it all work? Make your poem in regular tercets or couplets and use enjambment strategically.

[See the *Addendum* for more Writing Prompts.]

Discussion questions that explore craft and argument for the book as a whole

- Describe the relationship between the title of the collection and its poems. What, and for whom, is "wider than the sky?" How does this sense of width and expanse relate to the collection's themes?

- Often, epigraphs serve to introduce the reader to key ideas and to help the reader know how to read a collection. Consider *Wider than the Sky*'s epigraph: "Bring the balloon of the mind / That bellies and drags in the wind / Into its narrow shed" (from W.B. Yeats.) Through what lens or with what ideas does this epigraph invite the reader to understand *Wider than the Sky*? How does it inform or focus your reading of the collection?

- How do the poems seem to be ordered in the collection? What kind of narrative and/or lyric arc might be present because of this arrangement? In particular, what divides the poems into these particular sections? What seems to be the purpose or unifying feature of each? How do they work together?

- Each section of *Wider than the Sky* includes a poem with the title "Your Brain Doesn't Contain Memories—It is Memories," as well as a longer poem with multiple parts. What is the effect of spreading out the series of "Your Brain Doesn't Contain" throughout the collection, as well as of using a multi-part poem in each section? In what ways do these choices contribute to the collection's coherence? In what ways does these choices productively challenge what the reader expects?

- A central theme of *Wider than the Sky* is the nature of memory. What claims do the poems seem to make about that nature? How do these claims evolve and intensify over the course of the collection?

- The poems of *Wider than the Sky* frequently deploy metaphors and similes, and this deployment shows that comparisons are an important part of how the poems make meaning. Which metaphors and similes (including extended metaphors) seem particularly significant? What role do they play in the collection?

- Upon what sources and material(s) do the poems of *Wider than the Sky* seem to draw? Consider scientific facts, history, personal memories, folk tales, and more. What is the effect of these different sources and how they make their way into the poems and how different sources work together? How does this information participate in the argument(s) of the collection?

- Explore how *Wider than the Sky* interrogates moments of influence, from family to language. According to the collection, what has influenced (or now influences) the primary speaker and that speaker's sense of identity?

Discussion questions that explore craft and argument for particular poems

Many of the poems of *Wider than the Sky* relay the experiences of childhood. Consider poems like "Dulce Domum," "Learning to Barter with God the Way My Mother Barters with the Fishmonger Over Yesterday's Spoils," "Learning to Read and Write," and "Saturday in the Neighborhood."

- How do the poems relate the past to the present? That is, how do the experiences of childhood seem to inform the present?
- In poems like "Learning to Barter with God the Way My Mother Barters with the Fishmonger Over Yesterday's Spoils," "Learning to Read and Write," and "Saturday in the Neighborhood," the speaker seems to learn a lesson. What lessons does the speaker learn? What specific moments in the poems convey what has been learned and to what end?
- "Dulce Domum" and "Learning to Read and Write" explore encounters with language. What is the significance of these encounters? How do the poems indicate this significance?

Another one of the concerns of *Wider than the Sky* is the nature and purpose of storytelling. Poems like "Learning to Read and Write," "It Should Have Been Winter," "In the Family of Erasure," and "The Myth of Work" further explore the role stories play, and their relationship to the human condition.

- In "It Should Have Been Winter," the poem suggests the notion that "we are the story we tell ourselves." According to the poem, what does this mean? What does this mean for the present? For the past?
- How does the collection's approach to interrogating language and storytelling change over time? How does "The Myth of Work," for example, build upon the argument of "Learning to Read and Write"?
- Poems like "In the Family of Erasure" suggest the conflict between stories of competing motivations, and how a story can challenge a memory. According to the poem, what is the difference between telling a story and remembering a memory? What is important about this distinction?

Wider than the Sky invites the readers to reconsider what they think know about memory. Poems like "Memory Reel," "Your Brain Doesn't Contain Memories—It is Memories" (especially Part II), "Memory Hole," and "To Be Possessed of a Mind is to Be Open to Aberration" all remind us to think about how memories are made and how they relate to identity and meaning-making, while poems like "Narrative is the Native Tongue of the Brain" and "He Doesn't Have Alzheimer's" also consider the essential biology and physicality of memory. Pieces like "Reverberation" find memories held by the natural world, too.

- According to the poems, how are memories alike and different for different individuals? Where are memories made and held?
- What are the limits of memory? (Think about "Reverberation" and "He Doesn't Have Alzheimer's").
- How does the extended metaphor of "To Be Possessed of a Mind is to Be Open to Aberration" complicate notions of memory? What is the speaker's relationship to the dinghy?

Discussion questions that explore personal connections

- *Wider than the Sky* considers the role of memory in making meaning, as well as how memories influence us and what we do. In what ways do your memories from childhood impact your behavior and feelings as an adult? What memories, and the stories you tell yourself about those memories, feel most closely linked to your identity?

- Poems like "Dulce Domum," "It Should Have Been Winter," and "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story," among others, draw on stories remembered from childhood and folk tales. What stories from your childhood do you remember, that have stuck with you? Why have these stories lingered in your memory? What about them has been meaningful for you?

- In poems like "Anniversary," the characters wrestle with a loss, with the speaker ready to "burn joss sticks," while the other character is confident the brother is "still here." How do you approach losses like this? With hope? With a longing for closure?

- As *Wider than the Sky* explores memory and storytelling, the collection asks us to consider what makes something real. Are memories "real?" How do we account for the biological and physical, embodied, processes of memory? To what extent do you think our minds can create an alternate reality? And, if so, which reality is more real?

- To what extent are your memories individual? Communal? Physical? Permanent? Ephemeral? What has influenced your memories? How does your relationship with language influence your memories?

- *Wider than the Sky* makes visible the nuanced, complicated, sometimes harmful relationship between parents and children. What or who makes us who we are? How has your experience with your family of origin influenced what you think? What and how you remember? The stories you tell? The stories you don't tell?

Classroom Activity: The Multi-Part Poem

For this small group activity, students will investigate the multi-part poems of *Wider than the Sky* ("Return to Terra Firma," "First-Time Defendant at Nineteen," and "Wordlust".) They'll explore the form and function of multi-part poems, as well as the logic of the line, stanza, and section breaks. This activity can be scaled up in terms of difficulty for more advanced students, as well as simplified for beginning students. Each small group should work with a different multi-part poem, and then share their insights with the class, comparing and contrasting how the different multi-part poems work.

Small group analysis. Students should re-read the poem to which they have been assigned, and then answer the questions on the analysis sheet (provided on the next page.)

- Describe the structure and organization of the poem. How many parts does the poem have? What is their length? What shape do they take?
- What seem to be the characteristics of the different sections? Do they rely on similar techniques? Different strategies? What are they? Identify examples.
- What is the content of the different sections? Summarize each.
- What makes these different sections cohere? How are they related? How does the poem indicate this relationship?
- What seems to be the theme or argument of the poem? How does the poem go about conveying these ideas? What elements of the poem work together to suggest them?

Large group discussion. Once students have completed the analysis of their assigned poems, they should share their insights about the piece with the larger group.

Some analysis de-briefing questions for class discussion:

- What is something surprising you noticed about how the poem operates, given its multiple sections?
- Why not write the poem as a series of pieces? Why do the sections belong together in one piece?
- How does the multi-part poem turn from section to section? How do ideas evolve and change over the course of the piece? What is the effect?
- How are form and content (theme, argument) related in this poem?

Individual writing activity. Then, invite students to begin to compose their own multi-part poem. Ask students to think about the different strategies and techniques used by the multi-part poems of *Wider than the Sky* (for instance, "Return to Terra Firm" is a surrealist narrative), and to use these as inspiration (students should be ready to articulate these).

[student assignment sheet follows]

Course Code XXX: Course Title XXX

Wider than the Sky and The Multi-Part Poem

Name: ______________________________ Date: ______________________

Context: As working writers, we know that one of the tools we have to convey meaning is form, the particular arrangement we choose for our work. *Wider than the Sky* includes multi-part poems. During this activity, we will endeavor to find out more about why and to what end. As we work, we'll be thinking about these questions:

- Why might a poem include section breaks in addition to line and stanza breaks?
- How do multi-part poems make use of turns? How are ideas extended and challenged in the multi-part poem?
- What makes a multi-part poem cohere?
- In what ways can a poem's multi-part form contribute to its tension, argument, and meaning?
- What can we learn from this particular poem and its approach to form? How might we apply or modify these strategies in our own writing?

Instructions: This activity has three parts. In part one, you will closely read a multi-part poem with specific attention to form. As you and your group members discuss the poem, answer the questions in Part One, citing specific examples from the text to support your responses. Next, we'll come back together and share our insights with one another. Finally, you'll craft your own multi-part poem, drawing on the strategies and techniques you notice in *Wider than the Sky*.

Part One: Close Reading

1. Describe the structure and organization of the poem. How many parts does the poem have? What is their length? What shape do they take?

2. What seem to be the characteristics of the different sections? Do they rely on similar techniques? Different strategies? What are they? Identify examples.

3. What is the content of the different sections? Summarize each.

4. What makes these different sections cohere? How are they related? How does the poem indicate this relationship?

5. What seems to be the theme or argument of the poem? How does the poem go about conveying these ideas? What elements of the poem work together to suggest them?

Part Two: Present your insights to the class

Explain what you've learned about your assigned poem through your analysis.

Part Three: Craft your own multi-part poem

Think about the different strategies and techniques used by the multi-part poems of *Wider than the Sky* (for instance, "Return to Terra Firma" is a surrealist narrative), and to use these as inspiration for your own multi-part poem.

From what strategies and techniques will you draw inspiration?

Writing Assignment

For this writing assignment, students will study the use of folk tales in section III of *Wider than the Sky*, and then compose their own piece based on a retelling of a folk or fairy tale. Then, students will write an analysis essay that considers both Nancy Chen Long's work and their own.

[student assignment sheet follows]

Course Code XXX: Course Title XXX

Analysis of Folk Tale Revision in *Wider than the Sky*

Context

For this assignment, we will learn more about how some of the poems of *Wider than the Sky* take inspiration from folk tales. In particular, we will study "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story," reviewing historical and cultural versions of the folk tale as we closely read the poem. Then, we'll each explore a folk or fairy tale, and write a poem that takes a new approach on that classic tale.

Assignment

You will engage in detailed analysis and close reading of "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story," drawing on research that includes reading various versions of *Hansel and Gretel*. You'll also research another folk or fairy tale of your own choosing, using it as inspiration for your own poem. Your poem should be well developed and polished, including the strategies appropriate to the original, including attention to image, concrete detail, line, rhythm, sound, perspective, and theme, and somehow take a new approach to the folk or fairy tale.

Then, you'll compose an essay of at least 2,000 words that explicates both Nancy Chen Long's poem and your own, explaining how each piece relates and deviates from the original tale, by what means, and to what effect. Your essay should contain all the features of a formal composition, including a clear introduction, specific and focused thesis statement, unified and cohesive paragraphs, and a conclusion. Your discussion of your poem and "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story" should rely on specific examples from the texts and analysis of those examples.

Your essay might answer the questions like these: What are the formal moves and craft strategies of the "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story"? How do these moves and strategies impact what the poem means and how it relates to the original story? How do these approaches work in my poem? How has my poem challenged or changed the original story? To what effect?

Grading criteria

Your writing project will be grade for the extent to which it:

- Is fully developed, meeting all requirements of the assignment
- Provides meaningful insight into your poem and "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story," going beyond surface-level observations
- Makes a compelling case for how each poem makes its argument and how that argument relates to the original folk tale
- Closely reads the text(s), analyzing specific examples in-depth
- Supports claims with reasons and evidence
- Is effectively organized and structured
- Uses MLA formatting appropriately and is free from error

Addendum

Additional Writing Prompts

- Ekphrastic / cross-genre: “It Should Have Been Winter” is ekphrastic, that is, it responds to a work of art, and “Interstice” references Michelangelo’s painting “The Creation of Adam.” Write a poem that responds to a work of art—the work can be a painting, movie, song, or sculpture. For example:
    - Find a painting in the Metropolitan Museum Online collection (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection) that resonates with you, and write a poem inspired by it or that refers to it.
    - Write a poem in response to a favorite scene in a movie or song.
    - Write a poem that explores a photograph from your childhood or a favorite photograph.

- Found poetry: “Under the Influence,” “Clouds as Inkblots for the War Prone,” “The Knock and Wait Club,” and “Home Islands” are remixes of prose text. The author’s remix process is to take a section of text, such as the first 10 pages of a book, and then create a poem out of phrases and individual words, as well as new words not actually in the selection that are discovered either by applying erasure to a word or phrase or that are created using concatenation. Write your own remix poem using one or two articles from today’s newspaper or a magazine article you recently read or ten pages of a favorite book. Create the poem using only words that are in the text that you selected.

- Vocabulary/diction: “Why There is no Interest in Singing” marries vocabulary from two different areas—war and music—and plays with diction, syntax, and the conventions of grammar, for example, using the adjective ‘choral’ as a verb. Write a poem that merges two or more different vocabularies such that related to, say, birds and astronomy, or two different dialects, diction, languages such as slang and corporate-speak or German and English.

- Persona: “It Should Have Been Winter,” “Gretel’s Errata to Her Father’s Version of the Story,” and “I Get a Letter from Someone Masquerading as the Muse” are persona poems. Write a poem in the voice of someone famous. Research that person so that you can add interesting details into the poem.

Book Description

In her second book *Wider than the Sky*, Nancy Chen Long explores the porous and slippery nature of memory and mind, memory's recursive and sometimes surreal qualities, how recalling one memory resurrects a different memory, which then jumps to another memory, and then another, all connected by the thinnest wisp, as well as the breaches in memory—gaps, erasure, holes, disappearance. The book's title is from Emily Dickinson's poem "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—For—put them side by side." In addition, the Dickinson poem provides a scaffolding for the book: Each of the book's three sections opens with poems titled "'Your Brain Doesn't Contain Memories—It is Memories'." Together, the three poems comprise a poetic sequence that is a golden shovel of the Dickinson poem and a meditation on memory, touching on the familial, generational, and epigenetic aspects of it.

One of the main motifs of the first section of *Wider than the Sky* is that of memory as it relates to a child or childhood or when one was younger. In this section, a dying general remembers a particular mission when he was a fresh-faced fighter pilot in World War II, nymphs speak to Icarus' father Daedalus after fishing Icarus out of the sea, and the youngest of a sibling group speaks to her missing brother about his twin sister: "Dear brother who has been lost for fifty years, / she's spotted you a hundred times // wandering barefoot in the mud with a secret in your hand. / But she never finds you." The second section continues with the motifs of the first and adds into the mix the mind in distress—the confusion and denial experienced by a young adult who is being sued, the aberration of revisionist history that distorts a social group's collective memory regarding historical events, an adult recalling how she hid in a desert as a child. The third section carries on the preceding motifs, for example the individual and collective mental aberration that attends war. This third section also more openly explores the role of story and its impact on memory, mind, and identity.

Through form and content, the poems in *Wider than the Sky* mimic memory, its recursive and sometimes surreal qualities, as well as memory's mutability—conflicting memories among family members, changes in the collective memory of a society, a buried memory that is resurrected when one catches the scent of a forgotten perfume. The collection explores the role of memory in identity, the human brain's need for story in order to make sense of the world, and how who we are is, in one sense, a narrative. "If light is to the eye as language is to the / mind, then memories are stories written upon the brain, / & to be written upon is to be forever changed."

Major themes of the collection

The primary theme of the book is memory (both individual and collective) and its place in mind:

- the porous and slippery nature of memory and mind, memory's recursive and sometimes surreal qualities—how recalling one memory resurrects a different memory, which then jumps to another memory, and then another, all connected by the thinnest wisp
- the breaches in memory—gaps, erasure, holes, disappearance
- memory's mutability—conflicting memories among family members, changes in the collective memory of a society
- the role of memory in identity
- how the physical aspects of the brain and the body (e.g., through the chemical process of emotions), as well as aberrations of the mind, impact memory and identity
- the human brain's need for story in order to make sense of the world, and how who we are is, in one sense, a narrative; how a society uses stories and myth to help its members remember a lesson, a preferred behavior, or their position in the social scale

The main structural component is the Emily Dickinson's poem "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—":

- The book is titled after a phrase in the poem
- The book is divided into three sections that each opens with a poem of the same title, "'Your Brain Doesn't Contain Memories—It is Memories'." These three poems comprise a poetic sequence that is a golden shovel of Emily Dickinson's poem "The Brain—is wider than the Sky."

Motifs include:

- In the first section of the book, one motif is that of memory as it relates to a child or childhood or when one was younger.
- In the second section, one motif that that of the mind in distress.
- In the third section more openly explores the role of story and its impact on memory, mind, and identity.

Speakers and intended recipients

Speaker:

- There is a primary speaker for most of the poems, an "I".

- Some of the poems make use of a third-person narrator or an omniscient narrator:
  - "Home Islands"
  - "Umbra"
  - "The Myth of Work"
  - "He Doesn't Have Alzheimer's"
  - "The Children's Eyes are Wide Open"
  - "Clouds as Inkblots for the War Prone"
  - "The Knock and Wait Club"

- These poems are in the voice of someone else:
  - "It Should Have Been Winter": the nymphs, speaking to Daedalus
  - "Gretel's Errata to Her Father's Version of the Story": Gretel of fairytale fame
  - "I Get a Letter from Someone Masquerading as the Muse": a figment of the speaker's mind

Intended recipients

Most of the poems are speaking to a general audience. Poems in which the speaker is speaking to a specific person are:

- "It Should Have Been Winter": Daedalus
- "Anniversary": a dead brother
- "Hiding in the Mojave Desert": monologue
- "In the Family of Erasure, ": mother
- "I Get a Letter from Someone Masquerading as the Muse": speaker (a form of monologue)
- "Cataract": an estranged spouse