

On *Beats at Naropa*: Editors Anne Waldman and Laura Wright in Conversation

LAURA WRIGHT: What was the impetus behind this project?

ANNE WALDMAN: Editing a *Beats at Naropa* anthology seemed a compelling project, because principals from this historical generation—William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima to name a few—had been at The Jack Kerouac School at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. From the start. And it was a great choice to get you involved, Laura, because you had been through the Naropa writing program, are a poet yourself, and have impressive editing skills. And Coffee House was, of course, very supportive.

LW Could you speak about the early years?

AW Allen Ginsberg and I came to Boulder in the summer of 1974 not expecting to found a poetics school, albeit a poetic school we decided to name for the outrider Jack Kerouac. We found ourselves in this marvelous predicament of being anti-academic (Allen was adverse to giving grades, for example), yet being encouraged to start an educational community, and to create a unique pedagogy based on discourse, or as Allen called it “high talk”—meaning smart, provocative, original. Poets would teach what they know, and things would be discussed, mulled over. The Beat writers had *intervened* on the culture. It wasn’t just a matter of simply offering the usual kind of writing workshops, but *reading* and *thinking* lectures, panels, presentations as well. The Beat writers have been exceptional as political and cultural activists, investigative workers, translators, Buddhists, environmental activists, feminists, seers. There’s so much legendary history here.

I wanted to bring the kind of community focus that had been so important in my work at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery in New York City’s Lower East Side, in the sixties and early seventies. When I first moved out to Boulder I rented a room at the Hotel Boulderado, not really thinking I was going to stay. And when we began the program we didn’t have a desk, an office, a telephone, an adequate budget, or stationery!

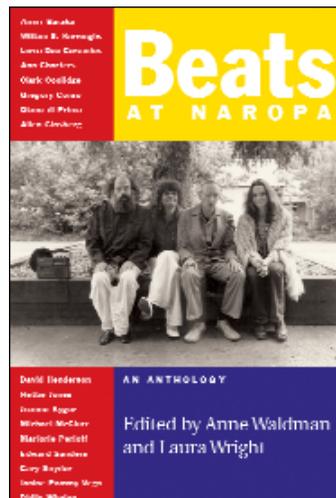
LW And now Naropa has a huge archive of all this oral material, on which we drew for this book.

AW And that’s the legacy for future generations. Diane di Prima, William Burroughs, Joanne Kyger, Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, were all part of the early years, all active as teachers and presenters. Allen Ginsberg spent part of every year for the rest of his life here. It’s amazing to have their “voices” preserved, and that they were overlapping and in conversation with one another is unique. I predict there will be a Beat scholar on every college and university campus in the coming years.

LW What are your personal feelings?

AW I am very emotionally moved and grateful for this legacy.

I felt myself identifying with the politics and culture of the Beats, as a younger writer. Many of us in the sixties were feeding on the energy of the New American Poetry outrider lineages. I felt a personal allegiance to the ethos, to the quality of mind. Of poetics investigation, to the moment-to-moment playfulness, the daily-ness, the



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tracking of the mind and experience, plus being awake to the minute particulars to daily existence of thought and dream and location.

This still is in many ways the most exciting literary movement in recent times, the connections to jazz, to black culture, the modes of investigation, traveling to the fellaheen worlds of Mexico, Tangiers, India. The interest in Buddhism, in ecology. Diane di Prima was a powerhouse—bringing poetry into public spaces, through her press and through her work with the Poets Theatre, which she founded. Burroughs's experiments with attention in his work with dreams, the grace of Gary Snyder's studies of Japanese and Chinese poetics, there was so much commonality in their curiosity. These were not careerists looking for tenure track jobs!

Laura, when you came to Naropa, what did you know about this school? About Allen Ginsberg?

LW I knew very little. I wanted to do something with literature (this was before the Internet was common). I sent away for information from a lot of graduate programs. Something about the Naropa catalog was so compelling to me I told myself I had to go there.

I had read Allen seriously for the first time when I was seventeen and studying at the Aspen Music Festival. I was puzzled by him. I hadn't read much of anything experimental then, but I was very interested in experimental music. I think his writing disturbed me, on some level, which I found intriguing. I was curious.

AW You worked at the Naropa Library—could you say something about the archive, the richness of the collection?

LW Those tapes used to live in a closet off of my tiny office in the library. I was so excited, even though I was no longer working there, when they got the grant to digitally preserve and catalog a large part of the audio

archive. It's an incredibly rich collection, and it's so exciting because it's still growing every year. One of the first things that struck me as a new Naropa poetry student was how different it was to hear the voice of the poet or author; this collection is invaluable for that reason alone, not to mention the amazing talks and discussions that have happened over the years.

AW What was exciting in the transcription process, for instance hearing the voice of Philip Whalen? What did you learn in this process?

LW Philip Whalen was one of my favorites to transcribe, I almost fell in love with him through his voice, his diction. Transcription is challenging—people don't speak how they write, so you have to translate, in a way, spoken thought to written language, in a way that is true to the speaker's intention and particular intelligence. At one point I likened the process to getting to go back and attend those talks, but being seated under the table, so I couldn't always quite hear what was being said or who said it. It is a lot like translation in that one has to be very attentive to the original speaker/thinker and use conventions, such as punctuation, to convey their meaning; one has to intelligently get out of the way.

It was interesting to me with so much material to choose from, the process we had to go through of narrowing down. What didn't get in . . .

AW I wanted to work with the sense of a live tradition and cover as many areas as possible and not be redundant. There's so much of Allen Ginsberg in our collection, we had to be selective. It was important, for example, in these days of print-on-demand, to have Diane talk about her work with what seems obsolete now—but was such an important economic necessity—mimeograph!—and the kind of relationship you had with the economics, back then, of publishing. And to have women—Janine Pommy Vega, for example, speak about their emotional, psychological, economic relationships with



Photo TK

Anne Waldman

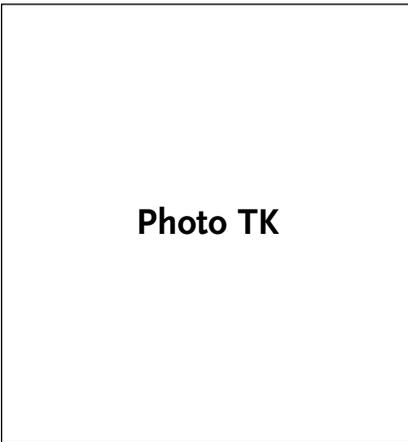


Photo TK

Laura Wright

the more-known, more ego-driven male counterparts. And to get Umbra co-founder David Henderson speaking on Bob Kaufman as an important figure of both the Black Arts and Beat movement. And a young Chicana woman—Lorna Dee Cervantes—speak of how she was inspired by the Beats. Philip Whalen analyzing a poem by his friend, Lew Welch, I agree—that’s one of my favorites, too—erudite and intimate at the same time.

LW And our logic behind organizing it. . .

AW We organized it thematically rather than chronologically.

I’ve always liked William Carlos Williams’s definition of a magazine—all these different bedfellows in the same bed—the idea of all these people sharing company in a book that’s not just a random collection, they were all part of this historic place, this historic zone, this nonacademic environment. Philip Whalen often invoked the sense of the academy being “a walking grove of trees” while he was at Naropa. And that we would be strolling along in conversation. I think that’s the essence of this anthology—the discourse, the conversation.

This is a book within a body of oral work that’s been documented and archived within a place with a fascinating history, that’s still very young, but that’s taken root in peoples’ consciousness. And in the culture at large. Naropa was home for some of the principal Beat writers for a number of years. When people think of the Beats they often think of the history of this place. There is some lively wisdom being offered here, of an ethos—whether it’s environmental or poetic, or about the importance of community. I’m heartened by the legacy as manifested in our collection, it’s relevant to the times we’re in.

