

Trungpa, Naropa, and the Outrider Road: An Interview with Anne Waldman

John Whalen-Bridge

John Whalen-Bridge met with Anne Waldman in his office above the Allen Ginsberg Library on August 11, 2009, while he was visiting Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado, as a Lenz Fellow. The campus was just beginning to settle after that year's Summer Writing Program, and Waldman agreed to meet with him to discuss Naropa's "Poetry Wars," the relationship between Buddhism and Poetics at Naropa, and the development of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.¹ They began by discussing the somewhat Dionysian origins of the Jack Kerouac School before moving on to more recent developments. The interview was updated in November and December 2012.

John Whalen-Bridge: Let's begin with the Tibetan Buddhist teacher who started it all, Chögyam Trungpa. The documentary about his life *Crazy Wisdom* (2012) is making its way through the Buddhist film festival circuit, presenting the "bad boy of Buddhism" to a new generation.² The Naropa story begins with Trungpa. Did you ever have a problem with his "bad boy" behavior?

Anne Waldman: No. I come from a world of artists and writers, and my parents came out of a bohemian background as well, with alcohol fueling a lot of creativity. Trungpa Rinpoche was what we often called an "activity demon"—he accomplished much of great benefit to others in such a short lifespan. He left a profound legacy through his books and his students. I never felt angry, but I did feel bereft when he died. I also felt sympathetic, having known in my own world people infused with brilliance, suffering, creativity, addiction, and "crazy wisdom mind"—or whatever his particular gifts as a meditation teacher were.³

JWB: It isn't a great model, is it? Addiction?

AW: Sometimes it accompanies wisdom. I don't know if I can speak to whether he died of alcoholism. I've heard how things were at the end, almost theistic stories of his body staying in *samadhi*—in meditation posture—for many days. I don't know if that is possible for a normal addicted body. I just don't know.⁴

JWB: Were you around for the Naropa Poetry Wars?

AW: I was in Boulder, and I was affected by the aftermath. The incident took place at the three-month-long seminary held that year in 1975 at Snowmass, Colorado.⁵ Neither Allen Ginsberg nor I were at the seminary. Had we been there, I think it would have gone differently. I think we would have intervened. In public situations

that required intervention, Allen had a way. He was skillful, and he was very good at pacifying chaos. He was also very diplomatic and kept a level head in the middle of... a political demonstration an orgy or Halloween party! [laughs] I wish we had been there because there was unfortunate harm and misunderstanding that we might have helped circumvent. Yet it led to interesting conundrum, conversation, argument, and different ideological and cultural views: Rugged American Individualism up against ways of presenting Buddhist dharma and teachings and questions of how wisdom travels from the East. How does it crack American style, habitual patterns, and spiritual materialism? Could you be a Buddhist and an artist in the twentieth century? The Poetry Wars brought things to the point where you had to talk about them. We had to talk about what was Buddhism. I remember Ed Dorn and Tom Clark discussing Trungpa as the “yellow peril.” But they were also interested in challenging Allen Ginsberg’s authority and position as a major cultural figure. W.S. Merwin stayed with Buddhist practice. He stayed through the seminary, and then he decided and said as much: Trungpa wasn’t the teacher for him.

JWB: People want to take a position. This is an interesting thing about Tom Clark’s book. Ginsberg had to respond somehow. He was a spokesman. Gary Snyder refused to say something, not because he was a fan of Trungpa, but because didn’t want to say anything that would hurt Allen. He was fiercely loyal. So I’m sure there are all kinds of things he would have liked to have said for *Shoes Outside the Door*.⁶

AW: There were a lot of versions of the story. It is really like a *Rashomon* tale. Ed Sanders’ book *Investigative Poetics* (1976) actually investigated the situation more thoroughly than Tom Clark’s *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars* (1980) did.

JWB: I haven’t seen the Ed Sanders’ book—copies keep disappearing from libraries!⁷ In retrospect, would you say the events were a blip on the screen, or did they have something to do with the evolution of Naropa?

AW: What interested me was the coming together of these two strands in my own life: the poetry and Buddhism. One could become a Buddhist and not have been involved with this whole situation. The “Wars” became huge. It got to the point that even when Allen and I traveled internationally, this incident would invariably come up as a question at the end of an event or reading during the Q and A. It was one of those knots that required a kind of “negative capability” and the ability to sit in the situation and see the discourse without being able to reason it out—no “irritable reaching after fact or reason.”⁸ It was difficult to take sides. I didn’t defend Trungpa Rinpoche’s behavior, however. Trungpa was also human, with human faults and obstacles.

JWB: Here at Naropa, the faculty members come from different Buddhist backgrounds. Some are from different schools of Zen, for example. But I get the sense that you are a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner in Trungpa’s tradition. Is that

right? Can you say a bit about particular Buddhist approaches at Naropa and which influences meant the most to you?⁹

AW: I was already leaning into Buddhism from an early age. And had encounters and teachings from Nyingma teachers. When I first went to India in the early seventies, I was fortunate to meet Kalu Rinpoche, Khyentse Rinpoche, and Dudjom Rinpoche.¹⁰ All remarkable teachers. I felt a particular karmic connection to Chatral Rinpoche, with whom I first took refuge vows. He was more rugged and outside the tulku lineage system.¹¹ His own teacher, Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo (1892-1940), was a woman.¹² He gave me permission to continue on my own path of poetry and creating community and cultural activism. He encouraged me to stay on the path at Naropa, which was an experiment in community and contemplative education. It was still the early years. In 1973 I was supposed to go to the Vajradhatu Seminary.¹³ When cheap tickets to India became available, I went on a pilgrimage with poets John Giorno and Michael Brownstein.¹⁴ John was already focused on Buddhist dharma and was a student of Dudjom Rinpoche. So I chose the trip over the seminary, which is interesting. The trip opened up opportunities to meet these powerful teachers. Subsequently, of course, a lot of those teachers came to the U.S. of A. Visiting India is life changing, in any case.

When I was first at seminary with Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1980, I was resistant. I didn't take the final samaya vows. These are the "promises" that bind student and teacher together in Tantric Buddhism. I later took the Shambhala warrior vows, which are vows to one's own mind and community and an allegiance to various practices that benefit others, and to the lineage that keeps them alive. In one ceremony, you would kneel into the guru's crotch, a typical bowing ritual gesture in many traditions, and a humorous way of seeing a very simple ceremony involved with touching a calligraphy brush with ink to one's tongue. Ink—which is essentially mineral and earth-connected—is considered the blood of the warriors.¹⁵ My connection to Trungpa as a teacher came largely through the Shambhala teachings. His vision of Naropa as encouraging and supporting the creation of a more enlightened society is essentially my practice. Naropa wasn't just another job; it felt like a spiritual project.

JWB: Did you feel like you had a 100 percent confidence in this man when push came to shove, or did you feel like you had *enough* confidence in this man?

AW: I had enough confidence. It was interesting to find where my part was in all this. I met Trungpa in 1970, and we founded the school in 1974 after I had been in India (1973) for the first time. I was interested in an alternative to straight academia, and toward the practices of more spiritual and utopian communities. Naropa mirrored a tribal situation: these different roles developing within an expanding culture. There were people working with accommodation and hospitality, artists and poets and educators finding where their energy could best be used; there was a task for

everyone. I felt very comfortable with this. Allen and I were basically handed the poetics school to create, with input from Diane di Prima and others. We were given incredible permission. “The Academy of the future is opening its doors” is an apt line from John Ashbery. We had been seductively invited into the mix the summer of 1974 and then presented a view of an experiment in education that could go on beyond our lifetimes and might benefit people – especially younger people – in the future. Trungpa Rinpoche understood poetry as a path and calligraphy as a path – we read our poetry together. He told Allen not to be so angry! He came to America wondering, Where are the poets? Take me to the poets. No, I would find it hard to critique his path even if I didn’t always “see” the methods clearly or appreciate his behavior.

JWB: Were you around when Joni Mitchell came through?

AW: Joni Mitchell came through Boulder in 1976 and was present at one of Trungpa’s talks, as I recall, and then met with him privately, and we went out afterwards with a few friends to one of the clubs up on the hill. It was the time where there was a frisson and glamour about it all. She was genuinely interested, however, a very subtle mind, as I was later to experience on the Bob Dylan Rolling Thunder tour. Also generous. She gave me a dulcimer to accompany my poetry. Trungpa was magnetizing many creative persons.

JWB: She spoke in an interview about her experience at Naropa, and, of course, there is her song “Refuge of the Road” from the album *Hejira* (1976).¹⁶ The song was quite popular—but people are surprised to hear that it was written about Trungpa. In the interview, she said that when she met with him, he did something magical involving forceful breathing—and for three days she had no sense of self. Her self-conscious nervousness dropped away, and she quit using cocaine.

AW: He could definitely shift the frequency with people. My first meeting with Trungpa was when he was quite inebriated, although completely lucid. I was going with a poet friend to pick him up at the airport in Vermont and then drive back to Tail of the Tiger in Barnet, his burgeoning dharma center in Vermont. He was mumbling about Casper the Friendly Ghost as a kind of *Sambhogakaya* manifestation because of these little holograms at Disneyland.¹⁷ [laughs] But he was magnetizing.

There was a seminar on the writings of Milarepa for two weeks at Tail (later called Karmê Chöling), after which I went to visit the playwright, Sam Shepard.¹⁸ After that I was supposed to go to Cuba on a trip organized by the Yippie activist Jerry Rubin and his wife. So I was stopping on the way with friends in Vermont. I had met Kunga Dawa (aka Richard Arthure) at an artist party in New York. Kunga Dawa was one of Trungpa’s first Western students, and he spoke about Trungpa Rinpoche being in the U.S. I had already met the great Mongolian teacher Geshe Ngawang Wangyal when I was 18—I felt “zapped” when I met Geshe Wangyal.¹⁹ I

felt his mind, I looked into his face, and it was like a vast mirror. I was told before I walked into the room, I should not wear lipstick; Geshe must be approached in the proper way.

JWB: You were told not to wear lipstick, was it the “royal treatment?”

AW: I was told not by the monk but by one of the self-conscious Western male students. When I met Trungpa Rinpoche, he hit me, he slapped me in the chest, and said something like “You’re too ‘New York.’”

JWB: A Lin-chi moment? Like the Chinese Ch’an master who whacks students?²⁰

AW: A Lin-chi moment. It did something in my head. Yes, I am “New York” identified – the speed and sharp edges and ambition to change the world—but I related this incident to something earlier he had said to me about New York—that it’s a “holy city.” At the time I was thinking I wanted to leave the city and move to the country. It was the seventies, and everyone was moving out of New York, getting out of the city and back to the land, “back to the garden.”²¹ But he told me to stick with New York. He said New York is the holy city, the charnel ground. And I did, and I continued to work on the Lower East Side. Within a few years, Naropa became a viable reality.

JWB: It always seemed to me that Trungpa had two tracks. The line in the Dhammapada would be: it’s good in this world, it’s good in the next, and whether or not there is a next, it’s good in this world. So put that out of your head. It seemed like this world, okay Shambhala. If we say your life should have magic in it, it’s Shambhala.

AW: In European countries, schools are church-based and run, particularly in Italy. Shambhala draws on certain kinds of models that are uncomfortable for people: the model of a court of enlightened Kings and Queens. But the view is to work in these times on an enlightened society, how to design governments by considering what is human; how to work in the world. Why does democracy have failings? How do we make sense of the clash between civilizations and worlds we are seeing?

JWB: For most people in the organization now, is the idea of Shambhala a human invention or is it as Chogyam Trungpa said, “Looking in the mirror, I can see the kingdom”?

AW: Both are true. Shambhala is dharma. If you try to be historically factual about Buddhism, particularly Buddhist Tantra, where those teachings are coming from and when do they appear, one must ask: is this the historical Buddha giving those teachings or do they come in from some other plane of existence?

JWB: What do you think about the word *progress*? If we talk about spiritual progress or literary progress, do you have a sort of a big picture for your own career, for example, your 25-year project?

AW: I guess that is when I’ve returned to certain texts and practices. For example, every time I do the *Werma* practice,²² I feel like there is something more I get,

something that clicks, why this is working or not working. It's still always a struggle. I'm not so good at visualization. *Werma* is a Shambala practice: the Roar of the *Werma*. I'm probably not even supposed to talk about these things, but I'm not divulging anything. These particular practices are like poems: they are liturgy, litanies, text that you recite, mantra, visualization.

JWB: I am reading a lot of science and Buddhism books, and there is a fast and loose solution that is sort of the party line. It's a relaxed sense of science that says: if you can't prove that it's not true, we are not going to give it up. That is not what science is. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very careful about that in *The Universe in a Single Atom*. He says there are three possible relations, and he is not claiming that Buddhism is scientific, but some people are. I think it is one thing to want to move scientific inquiry into the area of contemporary practices but another thing to deny that you have to make a leap from scientific rationalism to something else.

AW: Do you believe in magic?

JWB: I believe my personal experience, but my personal experience is limited.

AW: I have had prophetic dreams. I had a dream about time being a spiral—not linear or narrative. Certain kinds of dreams seem more like visitations and come at a particular time. I talked to Chogyam Trungpa about a couple of them. A kind of Yeshe Tsogyal figure was appearing to me and instructing me, showing me the map of the night sky which became a kind of fabric, an image I subsequently employed in the long *Iovis* work and in another investigative project of my own. In another dream, she came in the guise of a tortilla lady with an oven.

JWB: You know it was Yeshe Tsogyal?

AW: I felt this connection. My root teacher Chatral Rinpoche had a connection to Sera Khandro. There is lineage connection to female teachers through Chatral Rinpoche. I discussed with Chogyam Trungpa this notion of feeling some connection. He said it was very likely that this is some kind of auspicious dream, not just an ordinary dream. Not that any dreams are ordinary.

In the Buddhist tradition, you do Kalachakra practice with dreams that come at dawn. You are instructed as part of the Bardo practices to pay attention to your dreams, to use dreams, to enter into them and have conversations with the figures that appear. For me it's a poetic realm. My Manatee/Humanity project had some of that *terma* quality—I am always interested in the description of what *terma* is and what a *terton* is—*Terma* can be a ripple on the water or some cloud formation, the way a tree moves or the way the crux of the tree looks. The elements of phenomenality and our perception of them trigger a *Sadhana*. It's all very illusory: the light of that particular day, what the weather is, the color of the light. All these things play together to present an image of phenomena.

JWB: Inspiration is one thing. But the idea that a certain presence exists in the way that someone exists down the hall, that's another idea. But your feeling wasn't just

that you were reading books about this person and wanted to write a great work of poetry to include one of your eighteen ideas.

AW: I felt guided by the consciousness of some kind of a non-human elemental—I'm interested in this—what are the microbes talking about? There is so much going on simultaneously in all ten directions of spaces. Buddhist cosmology is a mind state for me. I'm not going to worry about whether Mt. Meru is in reality the center of my world. But in certain kinds of practices and certain mandalas, I can feel that center in my own consciousness.

JWB: For me, there has been sort of an ongoing civil war for decades that is a real hindrance. It sounds like you had a relationship with a teacher who was happy to allow you to come to terms with things so that it didn't become a problem. You mentioned several teachers: Chatral Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche. Within Tibetan Buddhism you have the guru model. You have guru yoga and *50 Verses of Guru Devotion*, which is a kind of voluntary enslavement. Now His Holiness the Dalai Lama has come along and said on the front page of *Snow Lion* that people are going a bit too far with this. But I'm in a community of practitioners where devotion becomes related to fund-raising, which brings up some suspicion for me. We've talked about people who were very suspicious about Shambhala. This is institutional religion whether it's the Catholic Church or this or that. The ideology and the service of the institution and the spiritual technology in the service of enlightening the individual can sometimes seem to be in conflict.

AW: This is really the rub. For this female body with somewhat feminist views, it's a constant challenge: institutionalization, patriarchy, the role of primarily male teachers, nuns having to sit below the monks. While Tantric Tibetan Buddhism does not allow for reinvention, there is room for a certain kind of spontaneity. Certainly some of these practices, which came *terma*-like out of Chogyam Trungpa's mind, are more like poetry. It interests me that these things can come about in our world time. We're not just reifying the Qur'an, so to speak.

JWB: Each year, Naropa hosts a Summer Writing Program. If we look at the programs for the last few years, what would you say have been the emerging trends? Is "contemplative poetics" a developing area of interest, or are there emerging trends that will in the future define Naropa to a similar degree?

AW: The program continues to honor its experimental and postmodern lineages in the New American Poetry, which includes Black Mountain, the Beats, The New York School, and Black Arts, and there are also classes in [William] Blake, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. We didn't develop out of an English Department; consequently there is much more freedom. We've given up "tracks" and embrace the hybrid as a more interesting model. Emphasis on feminism, on writing as a healing art (somatic poetics) grounded in the body. There's greater ecological emphasis. A focus on symbiosis. And so on.

We have developed a new cohort model for study. And continue to support activism in cultural projects in the community. Working in schools, prisons, with the elderly. There will be a Warrior's Exam, modeled on the Buddhist method of having students display their knowledge in a public setting for the writing students. There is a new team of younger writers guiding much of this, supported by the core faculty, which is exciting.

JWB: During the 2009 Summer Writing Program, I participated in a panel on "Poethics," and there was some discussion among panelists about the politically activist movement within Buddhism known as "Engaged Buddhism."²³ Maybe we could talk about the how political activism gets discussed in the writing program and on the Naropa campus. I like to use the phrase "Engaged Aesthetics," which contains the notion that literary art is responsible both to society and its problems and to the demands of literary art. Does this phrase describe what you mean by "poethics"?

AW: I would say so to some extent. But I would refer you to Joan Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (2003), which describes an aesthetics of complexity that leaves things to chance, and yet advocates taking responsibility for what happens. The mind of an artist or thinker or writer is attuned to the circumstances of our world and culture. There are different skillful means or actions required in one's work. For many years one of the strongest inspirations for working at Naropa has been the idea of working in community and the view of poetry by necessity coming into public space. This inculcates almost a dharmic view of the power of language, speech, and thinking and that it's important to be synchronized beings in our world and in our cultures as we are more connected and have more information about what exists in other realities. Other universes even, the 3-brane world²⁴ but ultimately a vow of sanity to not pollute our world further. To help "wake the world up to itself" through the arts, through poetry.

For many artists, the practice of art is a very lonely path and, just as in spiritual practice, you need retreat time and time away, time to really look at your mind and figure out how many directions you are going in and make decisions about how the work needs to take shape in the world, but there's also coming into community. I find that each project I do is very different, and yet I have a consistent tone of urgency that is always with me. In my current project, *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment*, on which I have been working for over 25 years and am trying now to bring to closure [published by Coffee House Press in 2011] there has been a consistent consciousness or authority of the poem over this long time period. I look at early sections written in the eighties and more current "cantos" written in 2009. There is a shifting reality—considering the terms of engagement in light of our shifting planet dynamics—the wars, the genocide, the climate change, the new weapons and technologies—yet a consistent aspiration

toward the light in a “still wild place,” which is the imagination. I think of this project as exemplifying a distinct poethics.

JWB: What’s the difference between Engaged Buddhism and, say, the psychological engagement of Henry James’ “Live all you can”?

AW: Engaged Buddhism requires that you benefit others. When I read Henry James I feel tremendously benefited by his sentences, his grammar, and his astute psychology, although some of the issues he writes about, for example sexual issues and subtle issues around relationship and caste and wealth or lack of it in the privileged world of the Boston Brahmins, feel dated. “Live all you can” was limited for females as he describes time after time – look at his complex heroines.

From a literary perspective, it seems that much poethics activity has had to take refuge within the academy. Many radical inventive writers are in tenure-track positions, now, a far cry from the lives of the Beats. The academy is a wonderful place for certain kinds of discourse and conversation that might not be supported by the mainstream culture. But this new experimental culture within the academy raises questions about privilege. Naropa is a different kind of beast. The economics are a constant struggle. There is no cushion; you are more exposed, less protected. So people are required to participate in ways that go beyond “career” and so-called comfort zones. And we are constantly inventing ourselves here.

JWB: Would you say that political engagement and contemplative aesthetics (and experimental writing) are waiting out a problem within the universities?

AW: Right, exactly. So I am back to this relative world about engagement and where it takes place and occurs. It’s so important that our audio and video literary archive survive. It is an oral treasure. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche talked about some sort of archive that will need to be out of America: for all the wisdom traditions, all the spiritual traditions. When the dark ages truly arrive with even more decimating “New Weathers,” as I call them, and ideological struggle, our gnosis will need sanctuary. Many political spokespeople who make decisions on the future of this planet don’t accept evolution. They don’t acknowledge that the earth is four-and-a-half billion years old.

JWB: What are some of your most overtly political forms of poetic composition?

AW: The *Iovis* project takes on war and investigates patriarchy. In Book III, I’ve included writing I did in the middle of protests held during the [George W.] Bush administration, especially during the inauguration events in Washington, D.C. and later on the streets of New York City during the Republican Party convention at Madison Square Garden before his dreadful second term. I was out on Seventh Avenue and at Union Square, down at the piers, and people were getting bashed on the head and rounded up by police. I was catching moments of samsara as they flew by. That seems as relevant to me as some moment or phrase that’s looking at putting my head in the yoke at a Hindu shrine in Calcutta where animal sacrifice



Robert Duncan, Anne Waldman, unknown male, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche — June 1976, Boulder, Colorado. Photo c. Allen Ginsberg Estate.



Vidyadhara Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche drove down from his favorite view on Bald Mountain for Rendez-vous with me in Boulder. He'd been ill, rumor'd to 've been "visiting the Dakinis" "Where?" I asked. "Right there," pointing to the window sill above the sofa. "What do they say?" I continued. He replied that sometimes they criticized him for teaching Vajragens too openly, sometimes told him to teach even more. That day he was uniformed as ideal Shambhala society, April 12, '85."—Photo with annotation by Allen Ginsberg, © Allen Ginsberg Estate.

takes place. Thinking about Mohenjo-Daro or the cult of cattle, you see on the coins images of cattle, with wooden yokes, and you see this same yoke in a contemporary Hindu temple. Then you see the dharmic yoke coming up in the water in the old Buddhist adage of the rarity of a human coming into that yoke, and then you see the yoke on the streets of New York when people are being handcuffed and tied up. In particular, there was a moment when the police cast out orange nets and “yoked” the demonstrators to haul them in. Those kinds of fascinating luminous details travel through lifetimes in the mind.

“In the mind of the poet all moments are contemporaneous” is a paraphrase of Pound. The point is that these things travel. Things are symbols of themselves; you know where you are, but at the same time the imagination is carrying these images that arrive from way back and become part of the fabric of the text. So I am talking about text in space, text in public space, text in performative space, text in historical, archeological space. And text from dream space. Many parts of *the Lovis Trilogy* are performative, as an epic by definition is. I want the feeling of being active and out walking around like Apollinaire or Frank O’Hara, in addition to the alchemical scriptorium. Every encounter is some kind of dharma gate opening.

JWB: In addition to making poems, you make poets. Naropa’s Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics is one of three or four places that stands out in the country as a poetics factory.

AW: Factory? [laughter] Poetry is not such a good “product” so to speak! What is its value?

JWB: You hesitate over *factory* and words like *institution*, but it seems to me that part of the maturation of American Buddhism is recognizing that “beginning mind” is not enough. Perhaps that is a heresy, but when we think about making things work over time, one has to have some kind of institutionalization.

AW: I always invoke the “temporarily autonomous zone” or TAZ from Hakim Bey, where one is less invested in the institutionalization of creativity than in the liberation of utopian potentials.²⁵ Something important has already occurred here. We have had an amazing meeting of minds, an experience of *tendrel*—auspicious coincidence—of things coming together as they did with the founding of Naropa, the Kerouac School, and all the other things—ideas, people, talent—that began that first summer in 1974. This has been enough to spur inspiration and activity in others, and around the world. It was an historic cultural intervention. It wasn’t until the winter of 1976 when the year-round school began that I felt more seriously lured out here and curious enough to see what this at least 100-year project would be, and I did want it to continue. In the summer of 1974 there had been the meeting with John Cage, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, and myself, where Trungpa Rinpoche famously proposed we consider a poetics school within this experiment of Naropa. That was my assignment and it continues to this day. But I have no illusions about

how it might falter and struggle and needs committed careful intelligence and an open heart. It needs protection from very different kinds of agendas.

So I returned to Boulder in 1976 to roll up my sleeves. Already classes were happening: small gatherings in cold rooms at what is now the Shambhala Center on Spruce Street. I was inspired by the Black Mountain experiment, which I heard about through the histories and accounts and writings of John Cage, the art of Robert Rauschenberg, the performance of Merce Cunningham, and through the poetry of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. Black Mountain College was a school for people coming back from the war on the GI Bill and one of the first colleges in that part of country to admit black students, but it was also seen as a radical weird experiment, much like Naropa.

I had also attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, and that was certainly an inspiration.²⁶ The vision of a poetic *sangha*, which is Sankrit for spiritual community. And I also had the years at The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, which I had helped found in 1966, sponsored originally by a grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity under President Lyndon Johnson. The purpose was to work with "alienated youth" on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The message, as with the instance of Black Mountain and its paucity of women faculty, was to include more women, inspire more diversity.

Iowa had the singular creative writing program at that time. When I started to think about a year-round degree-granting program, I was very curious about their structure. We were not accredited until 1985, which was quite a journey. I was also thinking about the Bohemian model and the School of the Night, a group of sixteenth-century Englishmen—poets and scientists—that included Christopher Marlowe and George Chapman, and which may have formed a kind of literary underground. So, yes, seeing what communities of poets that would gather, discourse and exchange; younger writers sitting at the feet of older writers, the apprentice model, which still goes on in Europe to some extent. Paris, Prague, Viennese cafés. It is only recently that there are thoughts of creative writing programs abroad. You would have arts schools, but as a poet, you would seek out an elder and meet in a café. So, this was some of the thinking that we began this project with, how to maintain some of that early spontaneous spirit, of meeting mind to mind with another artist—an elder—historically and otherwise. Both Allen and I were wary of institutionalization and certain kinds of deadlines and requirements, and selling the program, the kind of language used in advertising and also the consideration of how to evaluate creative students. For a while we had commentary for students and that had to be translated into grades. Allen was always very late with his grades. In fact, I think once it took him a year to hand them in.

I've watched the school change over the years. Streamlined, more standardization. A hierarchy of decision-making I don't always agree with. Top-

down authority. Even if it never achieves Ivy League status, however, there is still more need now for a place such as this in a world that has grown darker in myriad ways. It is important to be able to work firstly with the mind, to still the mind, to synchronize it. To break through habitual obsessive patterns. To act with care, kindness, and compassion. But with intellect and discriminating awareness. To respect others. To stay curious and investigative. And to be innovative, inventive with language, and to honor our predecessors who struggled with form, with genre, with imagination, with a world gone mad with war.

JWB: Can you say a bit more about what the present need is, and how you think Naropa can fill it? How are things going?

AW: The present need is largely economic, as ever, but things are going well with the new re-organization. The five schools of Naropa of which the Kerouac School is one are more empowered in the overall structure.²⁷ And there are now some fellowships for students and new faculty hires. More online publications and the like. The summer programs have been gathering 200 students regularly and the sense of mutual support is inspiring. The level of discourse is extremely high as well. I am feeling optimistic about the future and better benefitting our core students. We still need more support for the preservation of the archive. I'm co-editing an anthology on "cultural rhizomes" at Naropa. We have a brilliant CD of readings and performances (*Harry's House*, Fast Speaking Music 2012) recorded in our little recording studio where the music anthologist and filmmaker Harry Smith lived. Michelle Naka-Pierce, who is an accomplished graduate of the Kerouac School, is the new director of the core program, while I continue to be the artistic director of the Summer Writing Program.

JWB: But these are issues of creating an institution out of a bunch of people who chose a way of life because they do not want to put up with peoples' rules.

AW: Yes, and being part of this larger university, we realize we are not the only culture. But we have always been seen as somewhat of a subculture with our strange name—and that comes up for argument every few years: why can't we get rid of this "Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics" since it's outlived its use, it's no longer relevant. I went back to Chogyam Trungpa's comment when this came up years and years ago, that it's bad luck to change the name of a horse in midstream. I also think the name is broad and interesting and magnetizes in the world. It magnetizes, and it's a bit of a conundrum: what does disembodied mean, why would you select this name.

JWB: I met Allen Ginsberg in 1986 the morning after he first lectured in Gary Snyder's writers series at U.C. Davis. He said, "Do you know why we named it the Jack Kerouac School? It was a joke 'cause he was *dead*, it was a *joke!*"

AW: That's surprising. But I think he was referring to the "disembodied" that always provokes query. I also think he was trying to inoculate me against academic

humorlessness while I was still a babe. It was a compassionate job. There was that playful sense of the name, but it's not just a joke. Using Kerouac's name, in fact, was not a joke at all. He was a writer who was a magnetizing presence and influence on Allen, the quintessential American mongrel/hybrid: an immigrant football hero, a reader, thinker, and an original kind of mind from outside the academic mainstream, a traveler to fellaheen worlds who examined with meditative attention the grammar of his own thinking and mind and tried to catch it. Who was pierced by samsara, the sense of impermanence, and realized the first Buddhist noble truth of suffering. He had warrior qualities, but the tragedy of his life, which is common in our culture and world, evokes incredible sympathy and empathy.

I threw in the word *disembodied* because we didn't have a site, a desk, a building, stationery, a telephone, finances, or the usual accoutrements to be a school. But we did have a vision and a view, and a community and our own experience to draw on.

We want to have desks and buildings, but at the same time we don't want to over-reify this identity of "poet" or say this is the career track that we have here and this is what you have to do to get somewhere. In addition to a serious commitment to writing and scholarship, the training is about being a human being in artistic community, with attention to the larger world as well. Treading with respect and wanting to be helpful to the world.

JWB: This points to the momentary god of the disembodied transcendent phase rather than institution, buildings, constitution, by-laws, endowment...

AW: Yes, but of course what we do is embodied. It takes a body to make this writing, to sing our songs, to be effective in the world with our hands, our limbs, our minds and imaginations. It's this negative capability of the view that always interests me; now you see it, now you don't. Don't get attached to ideas about things; deconstruct notions moment to moment. We don't reify this identity of "poet" or say this is the career track that we have here and this is what you have to do to get somewhere. I think this is often a source of frustration and argument: why aren't we bringing in more people who talk about how to publish? Why don't we bring in agents?

JWB: One of your books is entitled *Outrider* (2006). Does the school teach an outrider ethos, and, if so, what does that mean?

AW: It means trusting one's own imagination and creative impulse, strengthening one's own mind, being open to new forms of experiment and poetics and not being susceptible to pre-existent power structures or patriarchal master-narratives. In a way, at best, it is a non-compromised vision. Women artists have had to struggle hard for a place at the table, so to speak; thus some of my thinking on this comes from the sense of finding the appropriate space for a new "body poetics." It also implies not falling into cliques or factions or wasting time with envy and malice. The outrider ethos includes others – and the writing of *other* places and cultures—it

means not limiting yourself to just what's fashionable. And breaking new ground. There's a protective notion here as well. So invoking that sense of alternative possibilities from more conservative poetry tropes as well, and also the "both both" of "negative capability" which opens the mind to surprise, spontaneity, long years of investigation, cultural activism and intervention, and a refreshed language. Outriders rode along on the edges of the herd—not totally outside it.

JWB: So for your outrider folk, what's unprofessional, and what are you telling your students not to do?

AW: Competition is a problem in the professional careerist world. I think you've maybe picked it up being here at Naropa that it's a fairly noncompetitive environment. There is a lot of mutual support and collaboration which is stressed over individuals finding their own ways. So that's another quality of the outrider: they are like-minded. There are ways to work in the world that will benefit one another, the work, the reception of the work. You can create these communities for support. You start there rather than the model of lone person who endlessly sends poems to the *New Yorker*, not in communication with a close writer friend who can look at their work. Of course the writing program provides that, you do have community, you do have conversations about what you love and what you love to do, that's important. I think that is part of the Ethopoetics.

There is also a sense of diversity within the community. I'm constantly encouraging students to look into other languages and cultures and get out of the American culture's careerist mode as writer and to be aware there are choices on this path and these choices are self-empowering. The gift culture is also important, the sense of each exchange as artistic exchange rather than monetary.

JWB: What would you like to see Buddhism in America do?

AW: That's a big question because I don't know all the different ways it's come in. The primary streams in my world are Zen and Tibetan. I guess the important thing is to wake people up. I could see cadres of meditators working in mediation, for example, a whole branch of the UN devoted to a peacemaking practice . . . I've had recurring dreams that are very Armageddon-like. We are living underground and can't practice except in secret. The texts, the implements—whether it's damarus or vajras—cannot be displayed or we could be arrested. I remember once having my bag opened at the airport when I had a Vajra and bell in my purse and I had to explain what they were. This was before 9/11.

We also need to pay attention to our speech, how we speak to one another. Trungpa Rinpoche instituted the practice of elocution. Sometimes we would be roused out the bed at 2 in the morning and have to go through these exercises: "I feel sorry for the Queen of England." I can hear Trungpa's voice saying, "No, no, no! I feel *sorry, sorry, sorry*..." over and over. This was at seminary in 1980. I was pregnant. Can you imagine what someone might think if they were to look at what

we are doing at this Buddhist seminary in the middle of the night working with Oxonian English: “Cathy’s hair is black. Her complexion – no! no! *complexion, complexion...*” [laughter] Trungpa’s view was that speech and discourse would get so degraded that part of our job would be to speak well. That’s an odd teaching.

JWB: Do you think *50 Stanzas of Guru Devotion* is bad advice for Americans?

AW: That is such a big question. I can barely practice this myself. Part of my job is to always see the other side, so dealing with the patriarchy in Buddhism is a phenomenal investigation or exploration or teaching. It is very hard for me to get solid. Buddhism might have to change, as the Dalai Lama has said, around issues of authority, gender, science even. I will come into situations and feel that something is wrong and this is not the real deal so I also trust my intuition as well. So there is that kind of barometer. And a healthy skepticism. And one needs always to separate out the enlightened qualities from the neurosis. Many of *Vinaya* rules were culturally driven and culture has shifted. It will be interesting to see how emerging women teachers will influence the tradition.

JWB: Thank you so much.

Notes

¹ The phrase “poetry wars” comes from Tom Clark’s *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*, his expose about the events at a 1975 Halloween party. Eliot Weinberg’s take-no-prisoners report, “News from Naropa,” was published in *Works on Paper: 1980-86*, 27-41.

² The film *Crazy Wisdom* presents Trungpa as a controversial teacher of Buddhism, but if anything the film downplays the degree to which his methods challenged conventional notions of how a Buddhist teacher should behave. Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), sometimes called “the Vidyadhara” by his students, was one of the early teachers of Tibetan Buddhism in the west, known especially for his methods of presenting Buddhism to countercultural Americans. William Burroughs once referred to him as “the whiskey lama” because of his heavy drinking, and he made no secret of his womanizing. He cultivated relationships with writers, especially Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, but he was heavily criticized by some. Kenneth Rexroth claimed that Trungpa was the worst thing to happen to American Buddhism (Weinberger 38).

He had a flair for the English language beyond that of any other Tibetan teacher, and he captivated countercultural students with what might be called his Dionysian Buddhist pedagogy: a willingness to test conventional boundaries—as if waging a Dadaist revolution—in order to subvert the bonds of ego. Much of the writing about Trungpa comes from students and tends towards hagiography. However, the

best account of his life is *Dragon Thunder: My Life with Chögyam Trungpa* by Diana J. Mukpo (Trungpa's ex-wife) and Carolyn Rose Gimian.

³ The iconoclastic "crazy wisdom" tradition has a venerable history within Tibetan Buddhism. See Georg Feurstein: "The crazy wisdom message and method are understandably offensive to both the secular and the conventional religious establishments. Hence crazy adepts have generally been suppressed. This was not the case in traditional Tibet and India, where the 'holy fool' or 'saintly madman' has long been recognized as a legitimate figure in the compass of spiritual aspiration and realization. In India, the avadhuta is one who, in his God-intoxication, has 'cast off' all concerns and conventional standards" (105).

⁴ Waldman refers here to the Tibetan practice of *thukdam* (Wyl. thugs dam), the form of bardo meditation in which a great master, having experienced medical death, keeps the kernel of consciousness within the body for a period of time, during which *rigor mortis* and putrefaction do not occur. For a close description of an accomplished lama's *thukdam*, see the following account: *A brief account of the passing of Kyabje Tenga Rinpoche from Benchen Monastery Community*. Web. 21 Dec. 2012.

⁵ The first "Vajradhatu Seminary," an intensive 12-week course of meditation and textual study, was held in 1973. Trungpa presided over each seminary from 1973 through 1986, except for 1977. Trungpa died in 1986.

⁶ *Shoes Outside the Door*, written by Michael Dowling, is a history of the San Francisco Zen Center and Zen in the United States.

⁷ A writer in the Jack Kerouac School told me that the book kept disappearing from the Allen Ginsberg Library at Naropa. The writer volunteered a photocopy to replace the missing volume—several times. In October 2009, I attempted to look at a copy again, this time traveling to the Library of Congress. The embarrassed librarian reported that the copy was missing.

⁸ Ginsberg often cited Keats' notion of "negative capability," a state of mind in which one could hold "opposite, contradictory thoughts...without an irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Raskin 142).

⁹ Tibetan Buddhism (also called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism or Northern Buddhism or Esoteric Buddhism) is a form of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in India but then moved to Tibet and other Himalayan countries, where it flourished long after Buddhism's decline in India. There are four primary lineages in Tibetan Buddhism: the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug sects. Trungpa was primarily associated with the Karma Kagyu sect.

¹⁰ Nyingma is one of the four primary lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. "Rinpoche" is an honorific title that means precious gem, and it is given to those who are considered highly realized practitioners, as well as to abbots of monasteries. Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1989), Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910-1991), Dudjom Rinpoche

(1904-1987) were luminaries of Tibetan Buddhism who had to flee Tibet in the wake of the mid-twentieth century Chinese invasion. They were each extremely important in transplanting Tibetan Buddhist teachings in Western countries. The reclusive Chatral Rinpoche was born in 1913 and is regarded as one of the highest living masters of Dzogchen meditation. These teachers, and Chatral Rinpoche, are all luminaries of Tibetan Buddhism who left India for Tibet.

¹¹ A tulku is a recognized reincarnation of a previous Buddhist master. A tulku is believed to be the repository of highly developed spiritual powers, is given special privileges, and may even inherit property from a previous incarnation. The tulku selection process—a kind of test to see if the child can identify possessions from the previous life, is represented in the Martin Scorsese film *Kundun* (1997).

¹² She was reputedly a “treasure revealer” and a *dakini*. Treasure revealers discover sacred items and teachings that are akin to spiritual time-capsules—teachings given by an eminent person but for which the world is not yet ready. A *dakini* is a female angel. See Jacoby. For a biography of Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo (Web. 21 Dec 2012). Also see Jacoby.

¹³ The 1973 Vajradhatu Seminary was held at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, November-December 1973, led by Trungpa.

¹⁴ The pilgrimage was organized by American Hindu students, with the tickets provided by Dharma Deppo, a guru Neem Karoli Baba (d. 1973). Neem Karoli Baba, a Hindu guru devoted to the monkey-god Hanuman and who had many American students, was also the teacher of frequent Naropa visitor Ram Dass (Richard Alpert, born 1931), author of the 1971 spiritual best-seller *Be Here Now*. Alpert was also a psychology department colleague of Timothy Leary at Harvard during the period of the LSD experiments. Alpert left Harvard to pursue other interests.

¹⁵ Trungpa developed a set of teachings, connected with the mythical Shambhala kingdom, that are not strictly Buddhist, although they involve meditational practices and a strong sense of engagement with the social world. See Trungpa’s *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. The current website for Shambhala training centers lists about 200 worldwide: <http://www.shambhala.org/centers/>.

¹⁶ The opening lines to “Refuge of the Road” are “I met a friend of spirit / He drank and womanized / And I sat before his sanity / I was holding back from crying / He saw my complications / And he mirrored me back simplified” (<http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=7>).

In the 2006 interview for *Reader’s Digest* with Mary Aikins, Mitchell said, “[Trungpa] was the bad boy of Zen. I wrote a song about a visit I made to him called ‘Refuge of the Road.’ I consider him one of my great teachers, even though I saw him only three times. Once I had a fifteen-minute audience with him in which we argued. He told me to quit analyzing. I told him I couldn’t—I’m an artist, you

know. Then he induced into me a temporary state where the concept of ‘I’ was absent, which lasted for three days. [Later], at the very end of Trungpa’s life I went to visit him. I wanted to thank him. He was not well. He was green and his eyes had no spirit in them at all, which sort of stunned me, because the previous times I’d seen him he was quite merry and puckish—you know, saying ‘shit’ a lot. I leaned over and looked into his eyes, and I said, ‘How is it in there? What do you see in there?’ And this voice came, like, out of a void, and it said, ‘Nothing.’ So, I went over and whispered in his ear, ‘I just came to tell you that when I left you that time, I had three whole days without self consciousness, and I wanted to thank you for the experience.’ And he looked up at me, and all the light came back into his face and he goes, ‘Really?’ And then he sank back into this black void again.” [Aikins 134-35]

¹⁷ According to the Trikaya (three body) theory of Mahayana Buddhism, the Trikaya Sambhokakaya (or, “enjoyment body”) form of Buddha-manifestation is available to higher-level practitioners in states of visionary experience, whereas the historical Gautama Buddha would have been a Nirmanakaya manifestation. The third body is the Dharmakaya, which refers to enlightenment as such, which is free of conceptual limits or boundaries.

¹⁸ Milarepa (c. 1052-1135 CE) was a great poet/yogi from Tibet. Early in life, at the insistence of his enraged mother, he learned magic in order to kill the uncle who had cheated them of their fortune. Regretting this evil act, he studied with the teacher Marpa, who made him build, tear down, and rebuild a stone house four times in order to purify his karma.

¹⁹ Having come to the United States from India in 1955, Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1901?-1983) may be considered the pioneer of Tibetan Buddhism in North America. The title “geshe” designates high-level monastic training at least as arduous as the attainment of a doctorate. Wangyal was of Kalmyk origin and had the further distinction of having to flee *two* communist regimes. He left Russia during its civil war, and then he fled India after the Chinese invaded and stepped up their occupation through the 1950s. In 1958 he established a monastery in Washington, New Jersey, and in the 1960s and 1970s he taught at Columbia University. His students in the United States, including Robert Thurman and Jeffrey Hopkins, have been among the most influential scholars of Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁰ Lin-Chi (d. 866 CE) is the Chinese teacher who is considered the founder of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. See “*The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi.*”

²¹ The phrase “back to the garden” is from Joni Mitchell’s song “Woodstock.”

²² The Werma Sadhana is a sadhana meditation practice unique to Shambhala lineage. It is based upon a Shambhala terma received by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche at Casa Werma in Mexico in 1980.

²³ The term “Engaged Buddhism” was first been popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and spiritual leader, in his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* during the period of the Vietnam War (1959-1975). He used it to describe the interpretation of Buddhism as a path of mindful social action and reconfigured the idea of “enlightenment” in ways that were clearly social and even political. His interpretation can partly be understood as a modernist attempt to reverse the image of Buddhism’s historical “quietism” and passiveness toward public life.

²⁴ Some string theorists believe that reality consists of multiple dimensions (as many as 9 or 11). The word *brane* is short for *membrane*, and the 3-brane world is a reference to our universe, which we perceive as having only three dimensions because the other “stringy” dimensions are curled up—six dimensions curled up within every point of space as we know it.

²⁵ Hakim Bey is the pseudonym of Peter Lamborn Wilson (b. 1945), an anarchist writer who developed the concept of “temporary autonomous zones.” These are highly charged communal environments that not undergirded by authoritarian control structures because they do not last more than a few years, i.e., they are “temporary.”

²⁶ This event, organized by Thomas Parkinson (professor of English at U.C. Berkeley), Donald M. Allen, Robert Duncan, and Richard Baker was held from July 12–24, 1965. The participating poets were Robin Blaser, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Joanne Kyger, Ron Loewinsohn, Lenore Kandel, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Jack Spicer, George Stanley, Lew Welch, and John Wieners. Terence Diggory, eds. “Berkeley Poetry Conference” in *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets*. New York: Facts on File, 2009. 47-49. Print,

²⁷ The other four schools are the Graduate School of Psychology, School of the Arts, School of Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies, and School of Natural and Social Sciences.

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Essay Abstracts

“On a Confrontation at a Buddhist Seminary”: Naropa, Guru Devotion, and a Poetics of Resistance by Tony Trigilio

Radical individualism, autonomy, candor, and populism are crucial to Naropa University’s experimental tradition and to its influence on Beat Generation literature. Yet Naropa’s influence on Beat poetics draws from two contradictory categories of understanding: the neo-Romanticist urgency of the unfettered imagination and, in contrast, the obedience and containment required by guru devotion, one of the core doctrinal principles of Vajrayana Buddhism, the mode of Buddhism that was taught and practiced by Naropa’s founder, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose students included Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, co-founders of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. This essay historicizes the tension between theory and practice in Naropa’s influence on Beat poetics as a way of understanding the complex forces that both enable and vex Beat oppositional writing. It examines how guru devotion contributed to the infamous Snowmass scandal of the mid-to-late-1970s, perhaps the touchstone example of the complicated relationship between the liberatory and spiritual impulses of Beat writing. Looking at representative poems from Ginsberg’s later career, this essay explores how Snowmass dramatizes the gap between Beat oppositional poetics and the spiritual urgency that authorized this same poetics.

Trungpa, Naropa, and the Outrider Road: An Interview with Anne Waldman by John Whalen-Bridge

In this interview, the majority of which took place in 2009, John Whalen-Bridge and Anne Waldman discuss Naropa’s “Poetry Wars,” the relationship between Buddhism and poetics at Naropa University, and the development of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. The interview addresses Waldman’s relationship with Naropa’s founder Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, her own Buddhist practices, and her thoughts about the future of Buddhism in the United States. The interview was updated in November and December 2012.

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