



LOUIS WARREN AND SPRING WARREN

Place, Poetry, and the *Sunset Western Garden Book*

An interview with Gary Snyder

Gary Snyder's poetry has explored Zen, nature, and labor for over fifty years, and in that time has profoundly shaped life and letters on the West Coast, in the United States, and even in Asia. Louis and Spring Warren recently sat down with Snyder at his house, Kitkiddizze, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, to talk about how he became a Californian and what the future holds for West Coast poetry.

LW: What does it mean to be a “California poet”?

Snyder: Well, that's the question. It's very difficult to talk about. Actually, there are four Californias, or five Californias even. You know, there is a split between the south and the north. And when I am traveling in the rest of the world, Europe or Asia, people ask me where I'm from, I say I'm from Northern California. I don't say California, I say Northern California. They know right away what I mean.

LW: You grew up in the Pacific Northwest. Now you consider yourself a Northern Californian. Why did you choose California? What made you decide to work from here rather than Oregon or Washington?

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Snyder: Well, I was born in San Francisco, actually, but spent my childhood in the Pacific Northwest, near Seattle. My paternal grandparents were well settled into the Northwest from the time it was still a territory in Kitsap County on the west side of Puget Sound. Anyway, I don't recall ever thinking there was a serious division between British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, or even Northern California. And to begin with, weather patterns and a lot of the ecology extend well south of the California-Oregon border. In fact, there's a lot here in California that belongs to the Northwest. The gardening zone for this area here, for the whole Sierra Nevada foothills actually, is gardening zone number seven in the *Sunset Garden Book*, which is the same zone as the Rogue River Valley.

LW: In Oregon?

Gary: Yes—zone 7 goes up as far as Roseburg in southern Oregon.

SW: So maybe when you go overseas and people ask where you're from, you should say zone 7.

Snyder: You know, I could say that in California, and most people don't know what I'm talking about. You have to be a gardener to know the zones in the *Sunset Garden Book*. But they're very good. They're very subtle, too. I have fun arguing and talking about these things. I say California's borders are extremely misdrawn and the two desert zones really belong with their own area. . . . There's an idea I take from Kroeber's work in California Indian anthropology. He uses the term "heartland" or "core California" for California Indian culture as based in the Great Central Valley and radiating south and north a certain distance and over to the coast.

SW: So to your mind, "core California" is the Central Valley?

Snyder: Based in the Central Valley. Along the rivers. And over along the rivers all the way to the Bay. But of course, the Central Valley was a big marsh and it was full of waterfowl. Back before European contact, Indians didn't really live in the Central Valley; they lived on the edges on the west side and on the edges of the east side. And if they lived on the west side, they made trips regularly over to the coast because they liked the taste of oysters. And if they lived on the edge of the foothills, they would come up higher to get away from the hot weather in the summer and also they could get yew wood for yew bows which were great trade items. So there's all sorts of reasons to work these things out.

LW: How does the radicalism of San Francisco and Northern California fit in all this?

Snyder: The west side of the Pacific Coast, from British Columbia south to Big Sur, and possibly farther south, has had, for example, since the very early twentieth century, a number of Utopian socialist communities, has had a number of visionary and often left wing writers. It has had a number of very strong women writers.

LW: You've mentioned borders being misdrawn. It sounds like you feel they don't match the complexities of land and culture?

Snyder: Oh yeah, straight lines with a ruler.

LW: What about the border with Mexico?

Snyder: That's another one. The history of that tells you how clearly arbitrary it was. . . . And the same with the Canadian border. Because the west was occupied, settled, and began to be exploited far too rapidly for people to get much sense of where they were or what was going on or what were the right places to put things. And that's why I would argue 400 to 500 years from now it will all be different. It won't look the way it looks now. People will finally get around to trying to straighten it out.

SW: So what drew you to California? Was it San Francisco?

Snyder: The first visit I recall, I was down here staying with my aunt when I was nine years old for a month so that they could take me to see the World's Fair.

LW: In San Francisco?

Snyder: On Treasure Island. I remember seeing the Chinese dive through burning hoops. They had the Chinese jugglers and acrobats that were quite memorable.

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SW: So, after your childhood visit to San Francisco, when did you come to live there?

Snyder: My mother and father split when I was still in high school. He came down here sort of tentatively. He worked for the Veterans Administration. So he came down to try that job out and as it happened, he and my mother never got back together again. So he was living down here and then he remarried. She remained in Portland some years longer. But that gave me a foothold to come down here. And I think the first time I did that was when I was seventeen hitchhiking on my way back from New York to Portland, I curved around to go through San Francisco to see my father. I found it kind of a bizarre place.

SW: How so?

Snyder: [Laughs] Well, it is kind of bizarre, don't you think? I touched base here, then I was going back to Indiana University to go to graduate school. I made my final decision there to quit graduate school in anthropology and linguistics and come down to Berkeley for graduate school, so then I made the trip back west. But I didn't start at Berkeley for a year and a half. So, I got an apartment in North Beach and I worked on the docks. And while living and working in San Francisco at that time, right in North Beach, it was on Telegraph Lane, I met all kinds of people. I was writing some poetry already then, and thought that this is where I should make connections and figure out what's going on in poetry. The Zen world was already getting started there. Alan Watts was giving talks on Zen out in Pacific Heights. It was 1952, '53. It was a very lively place.

SW: What are you working on now?

Snyder: I'm working on an East West Transpacific Buddhist Memoir with a lot of, a certain amount of criticism and a

certain amount of gossip in it. And then the other book I'm working on with a friend of mine who helped build this house in the summer of 1970, and he's an architect now and he is also a neighbor, he and I are going to do a book together here on the building of this house.

SW: That sounds like a fantastic project. You built this house in 1970. How?

Snyder: We all camped out down in the meadow, had no electricity and no power tools. . . . It was like nineteenth century. Old Jimmy Coughlin, who died when he was 96, came over here one time and he watched us working and he looked at our tools and he said I've never seen anything like this in eighty years.

. . . .

LW: How would I know a West Coast poem?

Snyder: It's not exactly loose, but the lines don't all line up as much as they do on the East Coast. A lot of [writers] are women. Of course, they've got a lot of women on the East Coast, too. But it's the content and the aesthetic approach to experience things different than it is, as Philip Whalen described his poetry, a graph of the mind moving. If you read,



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which you could easily do, especially if I Xeroxed it and mailed it to you, Leslie Scalapino's introduction to Philip Whalen's collected poetry. . . is a very good description of something that is basic to most West Coast poetry.

LW: It's not the same as Beat poetry?

Snyder: It's different from Beat poetry, which I am constantly trying to explain to people because I am often still categorized as a beat writer. And I try to make the distinction between Beat as a historical phenomenon, which I was involved in, and as an aesthetic and a source of a kind of writing, which I am not involved in. Once I point that out, most people with half a brain see it. And so it's simple in that light. Leslie Scalapino just recently died of pancreatic cancer. She was sixty-two. And we all feel very bad about that cause she still had a lot to do. She lived in Berkeley and was the author of six or seven books. And was not publicly famous anywhere except on the West Coast. But what a smart woman.

I would say that West Coast poetic aesthetics is more defined by a kind of empiricism, a presence in the moment, concreteness, physicality often, and does not rely on wit or fancy so much as East Coast poetry, which is characterized often by what I would call intellectual fancy, as distinct from imagination. Fancy and imagination are not the same thing, as T.S. Eliot said in one of his literary essays years ago. East Coast poetry is more internal or personal, more about me and my feelings and what is happening in my complex life, and human-centered. There's an enormous amount of openness to the landscape and openness to the physical world in West Coast poetry, and it has been expanding itself that way. One of the first people, the first person that you

could call a real West Coast poet is Robinson Jeffers. The second one is Kenneth Rexroth.

SW: And to your mind, what are the other influences in West Coast poetry?

Snyder: There's a big influence from East Asia, too. I'm not the only one who reads classical Chinese, but a lot of people read it in translation and took it on, and it became a significant influence. Robert Sund is a very good example. Jane Hirshfield, now there's a good example: a woman living in Marin County who wrote a book called *Nine Gates*, about poetry—prose book, prose essays—that is all derived from basically Japanese aesthetics. There's a lot of very interesting people that are doing these things.

SW: Do you think that East Coast publishers take California seriously enough?

Snyder: Well, you know, that's another thing that I've gotten over being surprised by, but there is an ignorant dismissal of the West Coast in a lot of the East Coast intelligentsia. There is an identification of it with materialism and sort of trivial attitudes. And then it's almost as if they're saying, "Oh yeah, and you've got a lot of brown people there, too. A lot of Asians."

LW: What new contributions are Asians making to West Coast Poetry?

Snyder: Right now I'm reading an anthology of Hmong poetry produced by the Hmong Writer's Circle based in Fresno and Merced.

SW: How is it?

Snyder: It's not like other West Coast poetry.

LW: But it is West Coast poetry, in a way?

Snyder: Yes. That's what I've been thinking about. It is, well, it's much more like Hispanic poetry. Which is to say it's about their experience of trying to be in America and it's about—a lot of it's about things in Hmong culture that they're still trying to connect with, and a lot of it is about their mother and father and grandmother, and a lot of it is personal pain about making the wrong communications, and a lot of it is very, very interesting because it's like one poem, I was just reading this, it says well everybody in my neighborhood is a Hmong. And

there's a couple of shaman down the street that we can get but then there's also some Christian Hmongs so we don't know which to go to. And then my mother gets sick and she wants both. And a lot of sexism that they're trying to fight, you know, find their way out of. And you know, many Hmong girls marry at thirteen or fourteen and some have their first babies and drop out of high school to start having babies. And so all of that is very much up there and in there. And so like it belongs to Central Valley culture, it really does.

LW: So is this a new strand in West Coast poetry then?

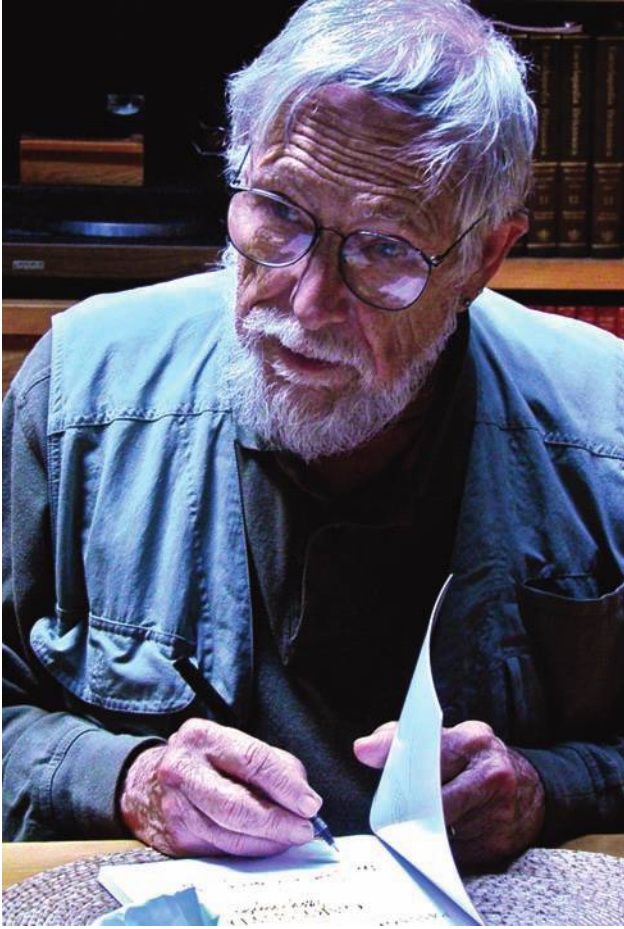
Snyder: Yeah, it's going to be a book from Heyday Press. And I'm writing one of the back cover blurbs for it. It's already in the works, you know? Pos Moua, who was a student at Davis, he is one of the editors of it. He was a student of mine, gosh, fifteen years ago now. The only Hmong I know who graduated from UC Davis in Creative Writing.

LW: Does this give you hope for California? Is this an optimistic story?

Snyder: You know, I don't know. I mean, it's all froth on the beach in a way. What will the next generation and the next generation of Hmong be writing like? It's like the generations of Japanese Americans. Nisei [the first generation born in the US] don't write poetry. Sansei [the children of the Nisei] write poetry about I'm Japanese and nobody likes me. Yonsei [the children of the Sansei] write about anything they damn please and [their children] the Gosei, they don't write probably because they're too little still. But, you know, my answer to all of that is, Guys, it's okay to keep some recipes and know a few songs, but you better get used to where you are. And it isn't the red, white, and blue. It's California.

LW: And how should people get used to where they are? What are the kinds of things people need to know to inhabit a place?

Snyder: They need to know where the creek is and which direction it flows. They have to know their water. I mean, they can start with some kind of a sense of place and it doesn't hurt to have a sense of the watershed as the sense of place that you connect with. It doesn't matter if it's urban



or rural or what. And it helps, well first of all . . . it helps to know that you are in a Mediterranean climate. And that it's normal for it to have six months of drought in the summer here. It's not weird. And that it causes California to have a number of plants that are adapted to being wet in winter but can also survive drought in summer. Understanding that there is an ecological component and a climatic component here and that you should probably not try to have a watered lawn. **B**

Things to do around San Francisco

Catch eels in the rocks below the Palace of the Legion of Honor.
Four in the morning—congee at Sam Wo.
Walk up and down Market, upstairs playing pool,
Turn on at Aquatic park—seagulls steal bait sardine
Going clear out to Oh's to buy bulgur.
Howard Street Goodwill.
Not paying traffic tickets; stopping the phone.
Merry-go-round at the beach, the walk up to the cliff house,
sea lions and tourists—the old washed-out road that
goes on—
Play chess at Mechanics'
Dress up and go looking for work.
Seek out the Wu-t'ung trees at the park arboretum.
Suck in the sea air and hold it—miles of white walls—
sunset shoots back from somebody's window high in the
Piedmont hills
Get drunk all the time. Go someplace and score.
Walk in and walk out of the Asp
Hike up Tam
Keep quitting and starting at Berkeley
Watch the pike in the Steinhart Aquarium: he doesn't move.
Sleeping with strangers
Keeping up on the news
Chanting sutras after sitting
Practice yr frailing on guitar
Get dropped off in the fog in the night
Fall in love 20 times
Get divorced
Keep moving—move out to the Sunset
Get lost—or
Get found.

—Gary Snyder

Visit www.boomcalifornia.com for an audio clip of Gary Snyder reading this poem and discussing his memories of the city.