

T HE NOMAD TENT

From the concluding symposium to "The Other North America," a month-long countercelebration to the so-called discovery of North America by Christopher Columbus. The panel took place in July 1992, under the Jack Kerouac School's summer nomad tent. At the time of this symposium, coach Bill McCartney of the University of Colorado's football team was cheerleading 25,000 young Christian men in an affirmation of "family values." Their cries of "Jee-sus, Jee-sus," sifting upwards from Folsom Stadium which sits on the bluff above Naropa, lifted eerily behind the Kerouac School's gathering—a gathering which included anarchists, feminists, pacifists, communists, antinomians, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Jews, homosexuals, Buddhists, Sufis, and punk rock singers.

Welcome—or farewell. To what, or from where? Is the Other North America a place? a time? a state of mind? Or somehow all three?

Each summer a mirage-like, carnivalesque nomad tent gets pitched on these lawns, under the great Colorado shade trees—cottonwood and sycamore—and for a month transfigures the underlying piece of earth. Two hundred people from across North America—some from further abroad—approach along the surrounding roadways and gather here to form an *akademi*, an "oak grove," a literal *grove of trees*, where people wander about talking to one another, or sit swapping poems and philosophies.

It lasts for four weeks. The *akademi* is temporary, provisional—a nomad market—a flash of lightning over the mountains or a magic lantern flicker. Yet it's real, an autonomous zone where we work with our proudest treasure, Language, to make—not make but *affirm*—the Other North America. The many "other" north americas.

What's it about? This week Amiri Baraka passed on a few words Thelonius Monk gave an inquirer about jazz: "It's about freedom, beyond that it gets complicated."

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And it is complicated, maybe *intricated* is a clearer word. All the complex, intricate weavings of talk; the ideas, conflicts, insights; the humor, anger, frustration, boredom that goes down when several hundred people gather, set up shop, and trade in language for a month. Whatever happens happens in the relationships, in the interstices—that's why I call this a nomad tent. Nomads are people of the interstices, of border crossings and unclaimed territories, of inter-zones and places in between. That's why we spend a month building things out of speech and writing—our profoundest interstice is language. Language occurs between us, it's always on the hoof.

So, to peer deeply into the words as they pass and discern the stories each comes freighted with. To listen to epics and ballads, battles and conquests that rise like smoke from our mouths. I watch with fear and amusement as on this continent one state government after another attempts to institute as its legal language what they quaintly call *English*—to make it the sole language used in the schools, at the voting polls, in the courtroom. Fear because—but do I need to speak of the painfully outdated agenda that underlies this effort—? something we've seen far too much of in our lifetimes—?

So I'll say why it's amusing. They are trying to legislate a storm-cloud. English, or American English, is a windblown document, a swirling nomad tongue. Put your ear close to it and listen: it is a thousand songs of exile, immigration, invasion, abduction, invention. Of curiosity and grief. It is a trail of tears, and the journey continues. What was it Levi said of Robert Duncan's teaching? That he realized, *we were being given maps for further study*. Our language works the same way. This is what brings writers back to it again and again—it gives us *maps* for further study. Maps that lead us to where we are. Have any among us learnt to hear past the words, to sound out the territory? To conjure a real place from vaporous sound?

Where are we then, where is Naropa? What's our *address*?

The: old irreducible Anglo-Saxon article
written with an archaic cipher *thorn*
now vanished from
our inscriptions—

the only *English* word
this address holds
if by English you mean the aboriginal tongue
spoken in England: *Angelond*
by the old *Angelcynn* the
'race of Angles'

Naropa: N. Indian scholar, yogin, lineage holder
in Nyingma-pa Buddhism (Tibet),
former abbot of the great
Nalanda Buddhist University
ruins can be seen in present-day Bihar State, India.
The name conjures the delicate efflorescence of Buddhism
throughout Asia—
as well as present grief
exile and genocide of Tibetan peoples
scattered across the planet

Institute: Out of Latin by way of Old French—
to establish, ordain, arrange.
an enactment of sovereign authority.
as today in the face
of unprincipled governments
we collect to affirm our own
sovereignty

2130: Arabic numerals
the Moorish expansion into Europe
Oriental sciences
mathematics
the zero a gift of traders from India,
a nothing the Greeks and Romans
never had

Arapahoe: Pawnee *Lirapahu*
"traders"
ghost cry of a native peoples
largely

vanished from these grounds
ancestral names return
to our lips each time we recite
the address we should weep
at their absence
the old ones

Avenue: Latin *ad-venire*
to approach, to come to—
Oh iron and empire!
the forcing of roads
a literal entry to this land

Boulder: water tumbings
and glacial erratics,
tectonic plates lifted—
place-name following eye's perception.
Old Scandinavian
akin to modern Swedish *bulderstajn*
stone that causes a
rumbling noise in water
boulder: *buller*: rumble
deposited in the language
by Scandinavian invasions
attack and plunder of the
Anglo peoples—
conjuring:

Colorado: Spanish, *red color*
noting description of place,
Iberian horseback marauders
like Scandinavian predecessors
out looking for gold
themselves now departed
a handful of words
on the trail—

This is where we are.

The postal address of The Naropa Institute is a collection of old words, a bundle of names and numbers that conjure terrible travels. Today we are here, and in the blink of an eye it will vanish. Monday morning a work crew will arrive, fold up the chairs, dismantle our tent, and cart the whole show away. A brown trodden patch of grass in desperate need of water and sunlight will be all that remains—scar of a wizard's festival. A holy marketplace where thought and counterthought raged.

But are we nomads, endlessly scattered? Does everything depart with the tent? Or are we prepared in some way to belong, to take up residence and inhabit this ground?

Last night several dozen people gathered to consecrate the little clapboard building that houses our Summer Writing Office. For the final years of his life Harry Smith—musicologist, filmmaker, poet, shamanic presence, teacher to many—lived in those rooms, thanks to a Grateful Dead grant. At midnight we held a little ceremony in his honor, about forty people smoking grass, swaying and singing an impromptu blues while Allen played the harmonium. Peter Cole affixed to the building a splendid bronze plaque he'd prepared. Around its borders he'd mounted tendrils, a roach-clip, a lizard. Within—

Cosmographer

Harry Smith

Lived Here

Sep '88—Feb '91

A first step. To make this piece of turf more than a place where nomads mill about before shoving on. To see friends, fellow thinkers and writers, as ancestral presences that make the place sacred. And know they lived out their lives here. *The dead are not dead.* Presences, animating the grounds and the buildings. This year we will be moving a letter-press print shop into Harry's old quarters. To further naturalize ourselves—to bring ourselves home. To this, our speech; and this, our land.

One year will we look back in wonder, and find we've become residents of both?

25 July 1992