

The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast

Lisa Brooks,
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The Common Pot offers a challenging and innovative exploration of the role that writing played in the assertion and reclamation of land and legal rights among key Native American leaders in the American northeast—a region stretching from New England westward to the Great Lakes. Rather than crafting a singular, over-arching narrative or unifying argument, the book pursues a number of related trajectories, all with multiple audiences and multiple potential meanings. This may be frustrating for some readers, but (as I note below), Brooks has her reasons, and in the end they prove to be thoughtful and well executed.

The Common Pot draws on and engages with literature in Native American studies, indigenous studies, Native literary criticism, early Native American writing, Native history in New England, and American studies/post-colonial studies. Out of this list emerges a wide range of guiding questions dealing not only with substantive issues, but methodological ones as well. One of the most interesting among these relates to the issue of historical perspective. “What happens to our view of American history,” Brooks writes, “when native narratives are not just *included* but *privileged* (xxxv)? [italics original].” What happens to our sense of American history, she asks, when Native stories are not just inserted into history in an attempt to be inclusive, but when they become the center of that history?

Such questions lie at the heart of the project. Brooks is an assistant professor of history, literature, folklore, and mythology of Abenaki descent at Harvard University. Although she approaches her work from the perspective of a professional academic, she also uses her book in creative ways as a means for engaging a Native past according to Native literary and historical traditions. Following Native conceptions of writing, Brooks works to establish her book as not only a recounting of such traditions, but as a participant in their ongoing formation. Also following Native traditions—in this case relating to historical accounts—Brooks grants particular attention to the places and place-based contexts in which events unfolded as compared to their temporal framework, which she identifies as a Western academic tradition. Brook’s overall attempt to frame the book according to both Western traditions and Native cultural perspectives is challenging for the reader (as it must have been for the author, too), and she acknowledges that readers might “find themselves frustrated by the lack of a singular argument, steady chronology, distanced objectivity, or other familiar markers of academic writing (xxv),” and she

is right.

But once you let go of this and embrace the book for what it is, it is a liberating and rewarding read. By her willingness to acknowledge potential confusion and frustration, Brooks establishes herself as a valuable guide essentially saying to the reader: trust me, I'll lead you through. Her goal here is to draw readers into the text as active participants, making them engage with the story and "feel themselves entering a place world" where they "will be compelled to use their minds interactively to try to comprehend it (xxv)."

Brooks again willingly admits that her book may cause confusion when she outlines her chapter structure in the book's preface, and again, she obliges readers with a careful account of that structure's complexity and purpose. The book is comprised of four historical chapters, the first of which is a "proper introduction" and the next three of which track case histories of specific "place-worlds." Chapter one offers an introduction to the concept of the common pot and the divisions and challenges and additions made to it in the wake of European colonization and conflict. The common pot, Brooks explains, emerged from earlier roots as a Native literary tradition in the eighteenth century to describe the network of action and social relations which sustained and reproduced Native people and their cultures. Chapter two examines Native petitions designed to protect Native villages as a critical component of the common pot from the dismembering pressures of English settlement in the Connecticut Colony. Chapter three examines competing perspectives on Native power and land in the wake of the divisive American Revolution. Focusing on the writing of competing Native leaders Hendrick Aupaumut and Joseph Brant, the chapter reveals differences of opinion about how best to define, protect, and unify the spatial interests of eastern tribes from central New York west into the Ohio Valley. The fourth chapter begins a two-chapter examination of the work of Pequot preacher and writer, William Apess and his efforts to revive the Native village, in part through the power of literary action, as a spatial expression of the common pot. Set primarily in Mashpee on Cape Cod during the 1830s, the chapter reminds us, perhaps above all else, of the persistence of Native people and Native legal claims to land well beyond the colonial period.

The book concludes with three chapters of what Brooks calls a "more literary slant," each in its own way examining or summarizing aspects of Native writing and linguistic tradition. Chapter five continues with Apess's work, examining his literary reclamation of New England as a conceptual Native space where Native rights persisted as part of a shared geography including both Native and European people. His goal was not to divide, but to invite Europeans into a unified vision of Native space, where all the region's inhabitants could find a place and purpose within an expanded version of the common pot. Chapter six explores the ways in which European writing was absorbed into and transformed by its interaction with indigenous writing. In particular, the chapter seeks to understand how this process reflects the constitutive construction of meaning that lies at the heart of indigenous communal history, and by extension, the entire structure of Brooks's book. As she writes, "'history' is not an object that can be contained or a subject that we can master, but is rather the collective activity of telling or retelling a story that belongs to the common pot (p. 245)." The book concludes with a short look at the intertwining of literary and oral traditions that has marked the development of Native writing and its relationship to the assertion and reclamation of Native space in the northeast.

A reviewer might be tempted to say that this book is not for everyone because of its atypical approach. But in a sense, there is something that we, as geographers, can all learn from this kind of book—regardless of our interest in its content, and regardless of our feelings about Brook's approach. What a book like this can do is to remind us to recognize the cultural ideas that are always embedded in the narratives we create and to challenge us to see beyond those ideas, even if it means at times letting go of familiarity. There is a larger world of meaning out there, this book reminds us, one whose history can be told and understood in many different ways.