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Native Common Pots and English Towns: The Space of Early New England

Welcome to the lecture “Native Common Pots and English Towns: The Space of Early New England” in this course! I will talk about spaces today. Have you been in a space that you really enjoyed and found effective? What appealed to you about this space? One space that sticks out to me is the stacks of my undergraduate library. Basically, you sat facing the wall and directly behind you were dense rows of books, all under a somewhat low ceiling. The lights were bare fluorescent strips, and the entire floor was not that big; you could walk end to end in less than 20 seconds. Most people sitting there were exceptionally quiet, even without being reminded of this. The space made me feel as if I were in a classroom but one in which I talked in my head. This is a very short sketch of a particular space that was memorable to me, but you can see how different aspects of it affected how I felt and even how I might behave. Now, we’re going to talk about space in early New England. I will discuss spaces of Native tribes such as the Wampanoag and the Mohegan, but also spaces of the Puritans. I call these “Native space” and “English space.” While these were certainly not exclusive to each other I think that it is helpful to identify some differences between how some Native people and some English people might have thought about the spaces that they were part of. I will first describe a Native concept called the “common pot” and then describe English towns. One question you might be wondering is, how is space related to communications media, the subject of this course? I’ll address this issue by discussing Marshall McLuhan’s ideas, including how he defined communications media. The learning goals for you are to be able to explain McLuhan’s concept of towns as a medium; to describe 1-2 attributes of Puritan towns, including meetinghouses; and to explain Lisa Brooks’ concept of the common pot and give examples of it.

First, I will discuss Native space. While there are a lot of ways that one can address this topic, I will focus on the concept of a common pot. This concept has been found in different Native sources (Brooks 3). The common pot can be thought of as space that consists of connections, interdependence, and support, and is a term that has been used by Native people to describe their own spaces. Lisa Brooks, a scholar of Native American studies, focuses on the metaphor of the common pot in her book *The Common Pot: Native Space in the Northeast*. Brooks writes of the common pot, “The common pot is that which feeds and nourishes. It is the wigwam that feeds the family, the village that feeds the community, the networks that sustain the village” (4). The common pot is a generous concept that does not delineate one specific material entity, but rather identifies the connections that exist within an entity. It can be a community, a home, a group. Knowing that one is part of the common pot allows one to act carefully and understand how one’s actions impact the whole. Brooks provides several examples of instances where the common pot is invoked, but one particular example is from Arthur Parker, who is Seneca, describing the beginning of a meeting of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (the Haudenosaunee confederacy was made up of six tribes, one being the Seneca). Parker writes that at the beginning of the meeting, people give “thanks to the earth where men dwell, to the streams of water, the pools, the springs and the lakes...to the forest trees for their usefulness...to the great winds and the lesser winds...to the Great Creator who dwells in the heavens above, who gives all things useful to men, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life” (4 qtd in Brooks). The members of the confederacy acknowledge the place that they dwell in, their connection to the other beings that are part of it, and the fact that they are together in that one place.

One way to understand more about the common pot is also through a Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) creation story. In this story, in the beginning there was water existing below the sky. A woman starts to fall from the sky and the animals in the water try to help her by getting mud to create a place for her to stay. Finally one of the animals is able to get mud and put it on the back of a turtle. The woman lands on it. Earth is created and Sky woman continues to create elements of the earth including giving birth to people (“Iroquois Creation Myth”; Brooks 2). According to Brooks, one way to think about the common pot is that it is Sky woman’s body. It is a place that allows things to originate, to come forth, and which provides for these things. It is a space that must be carefully stewarded, as we see in how the animals care for Sky woman’s body. Waterways, including rivers and streams, also form a common pot since they provide food and water for people. Settlements and movements of groups are made based upon these waterways; an example is the Mikmaq using waterways to pass messages to villages (Brooks 9).

Now let’s consider the space of the English Puritans. One quick note is that Native and English space are not necessarily exclusive; there were Native people who lived in towns that the English formed and English people who had to travel through Native lands. Lisa Brooks would even say that the Native and the English were part of one common pot, though many English were not aware of this or respected this. To discuss space from English perspectives, I will focus on the New England town, especially the meetinghouse. Many New England towns were built around the meetinghouse, which is where people gathered for various events including church. One piece of writing from the time period, “An Essay on the Ordering of Towns,” described the organization of the town. It said “First. Suppose the town square 6 miles every way. The houses orderly placed about the midst, especially the meetinghouse, the which we will suppose to be the center of the wholl circomferance. The greatest difficulty is for the employment, improuement of the parts most remote, which (yf better directions doe not arise) may be thus” (“Papers of the Winthrop”). According to this essay, the meetinghouse was to be in the center of the town. It would be easily accessible. While the writer of the essay seemed to hope that the more remote parts of the town, which is to say the parts further from the center, could be used, he did indicate that this would be difficult. The center was the priority—the center was where the meetinghouse was. Later, the author advises putting farmland outside of the approximate 6 mile town square; this land would subsequently be loaned out to able farmers.

Let’s look at the meetinghouse building itself. One popular plan for meetinghouses was the four-square meetinghouse (Benes 121). This is essentially a square shape with four sides. There was normally a gallery inside for people to sit on a higher level, and a small tower, or turret, coming from the center of the roof. The seating inside was usually arranged in a square or rectangular shape facing the pulpit. This square plan might enforce rigidity in social relations (see Old Ship church, Hingham, for an example. There is a link to pictures of it in the discussion questions). You would always have to choose to be on one side of the building, and not another, since the building is a square shape. The building makes it easier to organize people in groups since there are four distinct sides; if it were round, it would be more difficult.

Now, let’s consider how space relates to communication, the key theme of this course. To address this question we’ll use Marshall McLuhan’s ideas about housing as communications media. First, McLuhan defines media as “extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed” (*Understanding Media* 90). For examples, roads might be seen as extensions of our legs to allow us to travel faster. The telephone would be an extension of our ear since we can hear people from across the world with it. McLuhan includes housing as a kind of communications medium too. It is so because it is an extension of our outermost organ, our skin.

He describes housing as “an extension of our bodily heat-control mechanisms—a collective skin or garment” (123). He also writes, “Clothing and housing, as extensions of skin and heat-control mechanisms, are media of communication, first of all, in the sense that they shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community” (127). Housing allows humans to stay in environments that would be hard for them to stay in by themselves. It concentrates resources for groups, including heat. Through heat, humans can perform basic tasks for their lives. McLuhan also describes how cities are communications media. He writes, “Cities are an even further extension of bodily organs to accommodate the needs of large groups” (123). Cities can enhance on a large scale what people’s bodies can do—namely, keep oneself warm and shielded. For McLuhan, communications media is not so much about transmitting messages as much as it is about how technologies stretch, shift, and shape our everyday actions, including how we interact with other people. For McLuhan, communications media is about an extension of ourselves, of our body—this new way of doing things is what is communicated; that is the main message, and not the “content” (see chapter 1 of *Understanding Media* for more on the famous statement “the medium is the message”). Something like housing reveals how humans are able to cover and protect themselves, extending their “skin,” even in seemingly open and exposed spaces.

McLuhan brings up the example of glass windows in houses to show how the spaces that we live in can alter our everyday patterns. Windows allowed household chores to be able to be done more easily since they let more light in for people to see. They lead people towards greater efficiency in their lives. The rooms that we have in our houses, the passageways between rooms, and locations of heat sources all shape how we live our lives. McLuhan draws out the concept of housing as skin by describing how houses are often presented as metaphors of the body. Gothic churches have been presented as symbols of bodies, which are in turn symbols for a group of believers. The Gothic church is like a covering that allows people to gather together in one sheltered space.

Let’s apply McLuhan’s ideas to English space and Native space. How might these spaces be seen as extensions of the body? How do they shape people’s everyday actions? Let’s start with the common pot in early New England. According to the Haudenosaunee creation story, a woman’s body, especially when she is about to give birth, could be its own common pot space. Her body feeds another being and is very directly connected to another being. This creation story actually turns McLuhan’s idea back on itself. Not only do spatial media make us use our bodies in different ways, but our bodies are the original spatial media. The body itself is already a medium that molds how we interact with each other and with the world. The woman’s body can shelter another being. This body is the most primary form of housing. And according to Brooks, Native women have often provided support and nourishment for others, forming significant parts of the common pot (4). Women’s bodies allow one to exist and to grow; they are like a form of communications media at the most fundamental level.

What about Puritan towns? Puritan towns do not seem extremely diffuse. Instead, they are concentrated inward. The meetinghouse seems to be one of the primary gathering places of the people—people would have gone there frequently for church. This concentration of energy and resources seems to enable people to do different activities. They would be able to pool their collective energies towards one action. If the meetinghouse was spread unevenly or if there were a few meetinghouses, then not as much energy would be able to be directed towards one thing. Having one meetinghouse would be like a smaller kind of skin within a larger skin that is the town. If the town is the heat-preserving skin for a group, the meetinghouse becomes the heat-preserving skin for a group on a highly intensified level. The meetinghouse enables the Puritans

to work together as one unit. It enables them to talk with people from all around town at once. This kind of centralized energy doesn't necessarily lead to diverse kinds of activities, but it could lead to unified kinds of activities. For example, the Puritans largely shared similar religious beliefs. When people had different spiritual beliefs, tension resulted, and they had to leave (for example, Anne Hutchinson). It is as if the energy that is gathered together via the centralized meetinghouse would be wasted if it were used towards different ends. The meetinghouse was an effective place for preachers to give sermons and for people to all be listening to the same message and taking the same notes on it. It allowed the spoken word to work effectively, to reach as many people as possible.

To conclude, in this lecture we've discussed the town and the common pot—two frameworks for thinking about space in early New England. We've also looked at Marshall McLuhan's ideas on housing as media in order to consider what communications media is and how it functions on basic levels to change the way that we use our bodies and relate to each other. I've analyzed the common pot concept and the meetinghouse more deeply using McLuhan's ideas about space. Now, share what you think in the discussion forum. What do you think about McLuhan's ideas? What is your response to the concept of the common pot? As you continue to learn about the Puritans, consider how the spaces that they were in affected other elements of their society.

Discussion question 1: Examine this 3D view of Old Ship Church, a meetinghouse in Hingham, MA (<https://www.360cities.net/image/old-ship-church-one-a-1>). Analyze the layout of this building according to McLuhan's ideas and your own. How does it organize the way that people relate to one another? What kind of actions does it make possible? What kind of work can people do through this building, or what kind of activities become available?

Optional: Consider McLuhan's words in your analysis: "A triangle follows lines of force, this being the most economical way of anchoring a vertical object. A square moves beyond such kinetic pressures to enclose visual space relations, while depending upon diagonal anchors. This separation of the visual from direct tactile and kinetic pressure, and its translation into new dwelling spaces, occurs only when men have learned to practice specialization of their sense, and fragmentation of their work skills" (125).

Discussion question 2: Lisa Brooks cites Victor Lytwyn's work about the common pot in her book. Lytwyn's discussion provides us with some more context. He uses the term "dish with one spoon" to describe the "common pot": "The words *dish with one spoon* and other similar terms have been used since time immemorial by aboriginal people in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence valley region to describe agreements concerning shared hunting grounds. The dish symbolizes a common hunting ground, while the spoon denotes that people are free to hunt within it and to eat the game and fish together" (Lytwyn 210). Lytwyn also notes that the words for "bowl" or "kettle" were used, too. Where else in literature, culture, or other parts of your life have you seen a related concept about common, cooperative spaces in which people realize their interdependence? Keeping in mind that the common pot concept arises from distinctive Native traditions in the Northeast and is rooted in particular times, places, and Native peoples, compare the common pot paradigm with the other concept you identified.

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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