

“What Kind of Place Do We Want to Live In?” Place, the Humanities, and Public Policy in Maine

by Carol Nordstrom Toner

In the summer of 2014 plans emerged for a new landfill proposed for the town of Argyle in a location close to the Penobscot Nation's land and water. The Penobscot people, in response to this proposal, issued a resolution stating their opposition to the proposed site for the landfill and outlining the threat to their environment, their people, and their culture. In July, the Penobscot people led a protest march through Old Town and turned out in impressive numbers at a Department of Environmental Protection public meeting. At that meeting, about 60 people, many of them members of the Penobscot Nation, spoke out against the proposal, basing their opposition to the landfill on its threat to the environment and their way of life. In his public statement of opposition, Chief Kirk Francis referenced the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, saying that settlement “was based on...enhancement of cultural practices critical to the identity of our people, including the ability to hunt, fish and practice our federally-protected subsistence lifestyle” (*Bangor Daily News*, July 2, 2014). Tribal member Maria Girouard of the Penobscot Nation Cultural and Historic Preservation Department also testified, saying that the plan jeopardized all creatures living in the area. She urged protection of the Penobscot River, calling it a sacred river. And finally tribal historian James Francis spoke against the landfill proposal, explaining the Penobscot Nation's cultural attachment to this place. Francis underscored the importance of place by asking, “What kind of place do we want to live in?”

James Francis's question asks us to think about place and the quality of place, and his question also links the public meeting to public policy. His question, “What kind of place do we want to live in?” is ultimately a public policy question. Members of the Penobscot Nation and other local people attended the committee hearing to influence public policy. They informed the committee that they wanted their land to be free of

pollution so that they could hunt there, and they wanted the Penobscot River to be clean so they could eat the fish. When the Penobscots and others testified against the landfill proposal, they demonstrated a participatory approach to policy making. According to University of Maine political scientist Kenneth Palmer, such an approach is typical of Maine's policy-making process. Maine's state government, Palmer argues, is characterized by a “moralistic or participatory culture,” one that “stresses the importance of community and the obligation of citizens to take part in its governance” (Palmer 2010: 27). In their public testimony, the Penobscot people contributed to the shaping of public policy, thus taking part in the state's governance. The state requested input from local communities on these policy questions: Is another landfill necessary, and if so, where should the landfill be placed? The citizens responded with thoughtful testimony, and in September 2014, the Department of Environmental Protection ruled against the proposed landfill. In this case, the Penobscots and other local people demonstrated the effectiveness of people working together to protect the quality of place.

In a political culture that stresses active citizen participation, as is the case in Maine, an informed citizenry is essential to good government. And the humanities—the study of people through history and literature and philosophy—and the social sciences—sociology and anthropology and political science—prepare people to exercise their citizenship in a responsible way, as James Francis and the others did in the summer of 2014. They understood and drew from the history and culture of their people, making their testimony more powerful and more persuasive.

Similarly, in the book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues eloquently that the humanities and liberal education are essential to a democratic form of government. The title, *Not for Profit*, reflects

her thesis that the purpose of education is not primarily to create economic growth, but rather to provide an educated citizenry necessary for an effective democracy. She laments the decline in support for the humanities and argues for the importance of humanities in a democracy (Nussbaum 2010: 2):

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance.

Without history, how can we know where we came from?

Without literature, how can we learn compassion and empathy for others? And without philosophy, how can we imagine what a good society might be? As members of a democratic society, we all participate in the making of public policy to a greater or lesser extent. The humanities teach us how to think critically, which means thinking for ourselves rather than blindly following the loudest voices. And the humanities teach us compassion and imagination so that we can learn what is best for the common good, not just for ourselves.

In addition to the act of participating in public policy making, James Francis's comments suggest something more specific about place in Maine when he asked, "What kind of place do we want to live in?" He echoes the cultural geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, who said, "Space plus culture equals place" (Tuan 1977: 4). Tuan has written extensively about people's attachment to special places, including Native peoples' attachment to sacred places. He refers to such attachment as topophilia, which is "the affective bond between people and place" (Tuan 1974: 4). Art critic and fourth-generation Maine summer resident Lucy Lippard also wrote about topophilia in her book *The Lure of the Local, Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* in which she claims, "places have influenced my life as much as, perhaps more than, people." It is the local that lures her, that draws her to examine the nature of place where people and landscapes interact. She writes, "The intersections of nature, culture, and history...form the

ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local" (Lippard 1997: 4, 7).

While many of us understand these feelings of attachment to place, some critics warn that topophilia may lead to overly sentimental nostalgia, resulting in a sense of place that is backward-looking, static, and exclusive. Some people who love a particular place often resist change of any sort, preferring to keep the place exactly the same. Cultural geographer Doreen Massey challenges this conservative understanding of place, calling on defenders of place to reject this static interpretation. Massey urges us to embrace a more progressive idea, a "global sense of place," by which she means a sense of place that is open to new ideas and new people. She advocates a sense of place that includes the history of in-migration and out-migration, connecting the local place to places beyond (Massey 1994). She argues that place should be understood as contested and changing because we all have our own ideas about place. In fact there are many senses of place. Massey broadens our understanding of place so that it is inclusive and welcoming to newcomers. Recently arrived immigrants become part of our sense of place in Maine in the same way that earlier immigrants did. Massey explains the value of both roots (as in staying put) and routes (as in traveling), and says, "The new 'intrusions' are no more from outside, no more 'out of place' than were, in their time, many of the components of the currently accepted 'character of the place'" (Massey 1995: 183).

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Many of the ideas presented here, concerning place, the humanities, and participatory public policy, are integrated into the Maine studies program at the University of Maine. Drawing from many disciplines and sources, students in the program read Maine-based fiction and poetry, history and folklore, sociology, and archaeology. They examine diaries, letters, annual reports, maps, government documents, economic analyses, art, and films. They consider the concept of place and how it intersects with public policy. They ask what

does place mean? How do people interact with the landscape in the making of place? Whose stories are left out of popular images of Maine? And what kind of place do we want to live in?

At the same time, the program allows students to pursue their own Maine-related interests through interdisciplinary and community-based research. Coming to the program from all around the state, these students bring their personal stories and local interests to their graduate research. For example, one student who grew up raking blueberries on her family's blueberry barrens wanted to research the present-day blueberry industry and the quality of life that the migrant workers experience, asking, "What are the living and working conditions for the migrant blueberry workers?" Another student applied Martin Luther King's ideas about minimum wage to Maine and found that even though the state's minimum wage is slightly higher than the national average, it is not enough to live on, it is not a living wage. What kind of a place do we want to live in?

Having grown up near the Medomak River, one student investigated the alewives-enhancement program in her hometown. She researched the history of alewife protection and how the current stakeholders have responded to the state's public policy as represented in the alewife sustainability program. Another student, inspired by the work and methods of anthropologist James Acheson in his book *The Lobster Gangs of Maine* (1988), interviewed a bloodworm (a type of marine worm) digger about his work in this multimillion dollar industry. Just as Acheson has high regard for lobstermen's knowledge of lobstering, this student was impressed by the worm digger's knowledge about the resource and his concern for its sustainability. She concluded that when workers themselves understand the resource and the need to protect it from overharvesting, the state would do well to include them when writing policy intended to protect the industry.

For a local art teacher in the Maine studies program, the state's public art offers an opportunity to consider how public art reflects the state's history and culture. She examined many forms of public art, including murals that were completed during the New Deal era, the more recent and controversial *History of Maine Labor* mural created by Judy Taylor, and granite sculptures completed in the last few years through the Schoodic Sculpture Symposium. Following the lead of art critic Lucy Lippard, this student pointed to the ways in which art reflects a sense of place, and she urged

K–12 art teachers to integrate public art into the curriculum. Another student followed her interest in innovation and examined Maine's nineteenth-century innovators by studying patent records. She found an impressive amount of innovation embedded in these records—patents related to logging, lumbering, paper-making, farming, shipbuilding, fishing, and textiles. She described patents for water-powered custom saws to cut veneers and blind slats and shingles and tooth picks, to name just a few of the recorded patents. Guided by the insights of American studies scholar Kent Ryden and his focus on the interaction between people and landscapes, she mapped the location of the patent holders to demonstrate that nineteenth century innovations were place-based, meaning the innovations reflected the use of the landscape itself (Ryden 2001). For example, she found that the greatest number of forest-related patents was submitted in the Bangor area, Maine's most important lumber town in that era. Linking this study to Maine's twenty-first century innovators, she asked what conditions led to this flourishing of innovation in the nineteenth century and how those successes might inform today's innovation networks.

These are just a few of the ways that students in the Maine studies program engage with the state's history and culture, drawing from the humanities to increase their understanding about place and public policy. The Maine studies program, as well as many other humanities-based programs located both within and outside the classroom, provide the opportunity to link Maine history and culture to current events and policy making. Fair-minded policymakers will surely see that the humanities are not useless frills (Nussbaum 2010) that we can discard during difficult economic times, but instead the humanities are the foundation of our democracy. Because Maine enjoys a tradition of participatory political culture, we all benefit when our citizens and our leaders are well prepared to analyze proposed policies and to determine what is best for Maine's people and the environment. In Maine, where one of the state's strengths is the quality of place, we draw from the humanities to learn about other eras and other cultures so that we can preserve the quality of place and imagine a better place for future generations. As the Penobscot people demonstrated in the summer of 2014, our historic and cultural connections to place may result in a greater sense of responsibility for the quality of our place. 🐟

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*"Mount Ktaadn from W. Butterfield's near the Grand Schoodic Lake." Franz Graeter drew this image of Mount Katahdin in 1836 while serving as illustrator for Charles T. Jackson's expedition in Maine. The illustration is Plate VII from the book *Atlas of plates illustrating the Geology of the State of Maine* accompanying the first report on the geology of the state by Charles T. Jackson, engraving and lithography by Thomas Moore, 1837. (Collections of the Maine Historical Society, Maine Memory Network Item 6416)*



Penobscots in 1870. An image scanned from a black and white photograph identified as a copy made from a stereoscopic slide by Moses L. Averill, Old Town, Maine. The description on the original photograph was Indian Island, "showing the people living there," around the year 1870. Several of the individuals in the photograph are holding baskets in the process of being made. (Maine Historical Photograph Collection, MS 316, University of Maine Fogler Library Special Collections)