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## History + Resources = A Sense of Place

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# History + Resources = A Sense of Place

By Wendy Griswold



*Unlike many states, Maine has an unusually strong “sense of place,” or cultural regionalism. Wendy Griswold explores where this unusually strong sense comes from, and how it can be further nourished through literature. In doing so, she strengthens the argument for investments in cultural-heritage objects and activities as a means not only of reinforcing an already strong sense of identity among Mainers, but also of promoting Maine as a tourism destination. 🐟*

No reader of *Maine Policy Review* will be surprised to learn that Mainers have an unusually strong cultural regionalism, often referred to as “a sense of place.” This regionalism is the basis for cultural tourism and for many of the satisfactions visitors, new residents, and old timers find in the state. Rather than attempting to defend regionalism, I will assume general agreement that a sense of place is a “good thing.” Whether we consider the economics of tourism or the lure of a state that claims to offer “the way life ought to be,” I will take it for granted that nurturing Mainers’ sense of place and its cultural representations is a desirable policy goal.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will address three questions: (1) how strong is Maine’s regionalism, (2) where does it come from, and (3) what does it need to flourish. The thesis running throughout the discussion is that while a clear sense of place may exist in the heads of residents, it has to be renewed by regionalist cultural objects and practices. Otherwise, it will atrophy.

## REGIONAL CULTURE<sup>2</sup>

Regionalism is a shared cultural identification with a particular place. Regional cultures have not disappeared with mass society, geographic mobility, and electronic communications associated with the global village. In many cases regionalism is thriving as never before. Why is this so?

Explanations of regionalism come in two standard forms. The first emphasizes the authenticity of experience. Human beings occupy a particular territory having particular geographical features and climate. Over time these people struggle to gain and maintain advantages with respect to nature, to outsiders, and to each other. Such struggles produce certain types of production, certain sets of social relations, and certain traditions and symbols. The history of human activities within this territory generates a shared way of looking at things, and this way of looking at things, when articulated, becomes the regional voice. Thus, Maine culture reflects Mainers’ experience over time.

The second explanation contends that institutional arrangements and resources, more than common historical experience, produce regional culture. From this

standpoint, cultural movements such as regionalism occur less in response to intense feelings than as a result of an infusion of resources. Money and infrastructure allow previously held sentiments to reach an effective level of organization and efficacy. Regardless of the degree to which people are emotionally committed to or shaped by their geographic regions, resources channeled through those regions generate cultural expressions of their commitment: the art, the museums, the songs, the writings that reflect the regional experience. Thus, Maine regionalism reflects institutional arrangements and dollar flows.

Putting it this baldly, it seems obvious that both shared experience and a deployment of resources facilitate a robust regional culture. Let us consider what these mean for a state like Maine. While there are many carriers of regional culture, my particular research focus is on literature. In terms specific to literature, regionalism is when people categorize writers and texts geographically. This categorization influences many types of behavior: how librarians shelve books, how booksellers sell them, how publishers and marketing people promote writers, how professors and teachers instruct pupils about their literary heritage, how authors see themselves, how readers select what they read, how people think about houses and places associated with certain writers. When Camden erects in its town park a statue of Edna St. Vincent Millay gazing out at the harbor with a book in her hand, we see literary regionalism at work. Likewise regionalism is present when a visitor to Camden photographs the statue, or when a student at the University of Maine reads Millay in a course she is taking on “Maine Writers.”

Regionalism is systematic, but not all-encompassing. For example, Americans understand what is



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meant by “southern writers” and many writers identify themselves as such. Yet the counterpart—“northern writers” or “northern writing”—is virtually meaningless. Theoretically, any place can be the basis of intense regionalism, but not every place is. Maine is one of those places where cultural regionalism has been and remains exceedingly strong.

### HISTORY

We need to support the claim that “a sense of place” flourishes in Maine with more than just state boosterism. Let us review some of the facts. Maine is a small, rural state, a thumb of the American north-east sticking out into Canada and the Atlantic. Maine, as part of rural New England, was part of “the first agricultural region to grow old.”<sup>3</sup> Northern New England was settled during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Until well into the nineteenth century it shared much with the rest of American

[The] widely shared sense of being different is a basis for cultural tourism and a self-regard that ranks somewhere between healthy and irritating.

society, including the development of rural communities, the early stages of the transition to a market economy, economic growth, and an increase in both stratification and social tensions. But by the midcentury the region was experiencing a decline, especially compared to the growing industrialization of southern New England and the burgeoning Midwest. Maine’s traditional industries—fishing, shipbuilding, lumbering, granite, lime, and ice—all experienced crises and decline in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Some were transformed, as lumbering gave

way to paper manufacturing, while others disappeared entirely. Maine’s failure to experience industrialization and urban growth is one of the characteristics that has made it attractive to tourists and summer residents from more industrialized states.

In a recent report on a site visit to the Maine Humanities Council, two foundation heads said the council’s local heritage goals were “an appropriate celebration of the parochial,” but went on to suggest that such goals may not be necessary because, “from what we heard during our site visit, it seemed that the council, and the state itself, does an exceptional job preserving local and regional heritage already.”<sup>4</sup> This observation is nothing new; Maine has always had a sharp sense of its distinctiveness. Such localism came from the state’s history as the Massachusetts backwater—the state that didn’t gain statehood until some thirty years after the rest of the East Coast. Maine was where the younger sons of Massachusetts farmers went to find land when there was no more at home. Maine is where ethnic ancestry (English followed by French) differs not only from the rest of the United States (German followed by Irish), but even from New England as a whole (Irish followed by English).<sup>5</sup> Maine stayed rural when the rest of the country grew urban, stayed poor as the rest grew wealthier, and promoted itself to outsiders as a “vacationland,” or in other words, a two-week respite from real life. This widely shared sense of being different is a basis for cultural tourism and a self-regard that ranks somewhere between healthy and irritating.

Where does such a sense of distinctiveness come from? People from any state or region relish their local peculiarities, as in pride in and promotion of regional cuisine, and any state can whip together a program or reading list devoted to its literary favorite sons and daughters. Unusually robust regional cultures seem to occur in three situations:

- **When the state or region is on the national periphery.** If a place is central to the national self-definition, its cultural attributes will be regarded as those of the nation, not of the region. Regionalism flourishes when a place

regards itself as separate from, even in opposition to, the national culture. This is why we can think of southern culture more readily than northern culture, why “the West” as a region seems more obvious than “the East.”

- **When the state or region attracts highly educated tourists.** Of the many attributes that attract visitors, regional culture, despite the increasingly successful efforts of those who promote cultural tourism, is not at the top of the list. Areas that attract educated and affluent outsiders such as tourists or seasonal residents can support highly crafted local culture: restaurants featuring the native cuisine; historical preservation; performers, artists, and writers. Northern New Mexico is an example of this type of visitor supporting this type of regional culture.
- **When the state or region has a strong book culture.** Writing is the vehicle that carries, promotes, and perpetuates regionalism. Areas with plentiful book stores and an active local reading class have the resources to sustain literary expression of the area’s characteristics.

The three characteristics do not always go together. Florida has had, at least until very recently, a sense of being out of the mainstream, but its tourism has been mass rather than high-end and it has not had a strong book culture. New York has a strong book culture but no sense of being on the periphery of anything. It is when we have all three characteristics, as in New Mexico, that cultural regionalism flourishes.

Maine is such a case. Its historical sense of being on the periphery, even from New England, is strong and well-grounded in fact. Maine’s out-of-the-mainstream status, both geographically and in terms of population (it dropped from thirty-eighth to fortieth in population between the 1990 and 2000 censuses), seems secure, and this is good news for its regional culture. Yet the combination of its natural attributes, relative closeness to eastern cities, and educational institutions has given it a

pattern of visitors—summer residents, students, short-term tourists—who have both education and money to spend. One of the things such visitors spend money on is culture.

Like the other New England states, Maine has a strong literary culture. It ranks third among the fifty states in library book volume per capita.<sup>6</sup> Having a lot of books in the library is not the same as having a lot of readers in the library, and Maine hovers around average in terms of circulation per capita and reference transactions per capita. This isn’t because there aren’t librarians to help, for the state is above average in terms of librarians per capita as well. Maine is also well endowed with publishers. *Literary Market Place 2002* lists twenty-four publishers in Maine, making it twenty-sixth among the states, well above its fortieth place in terms of population.<sup>7</sup>

## RESOURCES

I have suggested that Maine possesses all the cultural fundamentals to impress both its residents and outsiders with a sense of its distinctiveness. Now we turn to the institutional infrastructure. What happens when a state with a sense of place, a sense of being different, has some organizational and financial resources to promote that distinctiveness?

Maine has some advantages that make modest inputs have high impact. Regional collective identity tends to be strong, and thus an infusion of resources tends to make a difference, in places having small and scattered populations. It requires a certain density of contacts and interactions to sustain a literary world. Therefore, in a region where there are relatively few people interested in literature and where these people are scattered around, an input of resources that help connect people to one another can make a big difference. For example, this can occur by producing a critical mass of relationships that created the occasions in which a perhaps preexisting collective identity was articulated. Here we note that Maine has the lowest population density of any state east of the Mississippi; this is the type of situation where simple inputs such as a Web site, a newsletter, or a mailing list can have considerable impact.

It helps to have the resource flows follow the cultural configuration. Since collective identities are always multiple and overlapping, the fewer direct contradictions that exist between one dimension of collective identity and others, the stronger that dimension will be. Therefore, an infusion of resources along territorial lines that corresponds with—or at least does not absolutely contradict—other territorial identities, is more apt to produce regionalism of the cognitive and emotional sense. Along these lines one might note that there exists a potential contradiction between New England culture and Maine culture, but Maine has probably had a more state-based sense of identity than any of the other New England states. In any case, however, since most federal resources are funneled through state organizations, the state identity has likely expanded relative to the New England or Yankee identity.

The Maine Humanities Council (MHC) offers one clear demonstration of what happens when resources put some wind in the sails of regionalism. The MHC, one of the state councils set up following the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has been a key player in giving concrete expression to Maine's sense of place.

The mission of the Maine Humanities Council is to engage the people of Maine in the power and pleasure of ideas. The council brings people and ideas together to encourage a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, fostering wisdom in an age of information, providing context in a time of change.<sup>8</sup>

One shouldn't make too much of mission statements, of course, and as a practical matter, the Maine Humanities Council, like its counterpart in every state, is all about money: raising it and giving it out. A little over a third of its operating revenues come from the federal government in the form of NEH grants, about the same from private foundations and corporations, and the remainder from gifts, investments, and program income. Seventy-nine percent of these funds go into programs, grants, and technical assistance, while the rest supports administration and program development.<sup>9</sup>

The MHC will fund Mainers or outsiders; the key criterion is that the project be of interest to Maine people. People in the state share some cultural interests with non-Mainers—when the council sponsored a fall musical weekend dedicated to “Mozart's Don Giovanni,” there was no particular Maine angle—but many programs are indeed “an appropriate celebration of the parochial.” Of the eighty-seven grants awarded in Fiscal Year 2001, a full thirty-eight involved local communities. The funding came from the Maine State Legislature via the New Century Community Program, a collaboration of seven state cultural agencies. Grants went, for example, to a series of maritime history lectures centered on Portland Harbor, a planning grant for the Millinocket centennial, and a documentary on the Swedes in Aroostook County.

Most of the MHC activities support regionalism in terms of state and local consciousness in general, but a few support literary and cultural regionalism in particular. The representation of place is an ongoing project. The Vivian E. Hussey Primary School in Berwick won \$1,000 for an in-service course on “Literary Maine: Maine Children's Literature, Past and Present”; the University of Southern Maine got \$1,050 for a conference on “The Artist's Inspiration: A Sense of Place”; and the Northwest Historic Film in Bucksport got \$5,000 for “Rural Places/Lost Worlds,” showing “rare prints of films set in Maine and other ‘rural places.’”

Maine's Center for the Book is another institutional base for the promotion of state literature, organizationally separate but functionally close to the MHC. Since the Library of Congress initiated the Center for the Book in 1984, forty-eight states have set up their own centers, with Maine coming aboard in 1997. Maine's center runs programs such as the “Born to Read” family literacy program for families with young children or the “New Books, New Readers” program for adults. Of the center's “Let's Talk About It” book discussions groups, with books and leadership made available for local groups, about a quarter of the programs center around Maine or regional readings. For example, “The Passage of Time, The Meaning of Change: Perspectives by Five Writers From Maine” involves discussants in the question of whether change means progress. In considering this, groups read some Maine classics: Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, E. B. White's *One Man's Meat*, Carolyn

Chute's *The Beans of Egypt Maine*, Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Collected Lyrics*, and May Sarton's *As We Are Now*.

The organization that is most explicit about promoting Maine literature is the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance (MWPA). Indeed, number one on its list of goals is, "Promoting Literacy and the appreciation of Maine literature."<sup>10</sup> At first glance this may seem like an odd goal, for there is no natural connection between "Literacy" and regional literature. The intent becomes clearer when we consider the other goals: "Creating a network of writers, readers and publishers. Promoting opportunities for writers to improve their writing and marketing skills. Informing members and the public of Maine literary and publishing news." "Literacy," in other words, means awareness of Maine writers and writing.

Although the MWPA no longer sells books through its Book Service as it once did, it does everything else imaginable to promote Maine literature. It organizes readings and book signings. It promotes Maine authors at the Maine Festival and other annual events. It runs workshops and panel discussions. It has published an impressive anthology, *Maine Speaks: Anthology of Maine Literature*, which is widely used in the classroom. It provides speakers. It connects and informs writers and publishers through *Maine in Print*, its bimonthly newsletter, and through its *Maine Literary Yellow Pages*. It sponsors student writing contests. It participates in literacy programs such as Verizon's "Read with Me" initiative. Most generally, it serves as an information clearinghouse, with its staff responding to dozens of requests every day.

#### DID IT WORK?

Activities like those of the Center for the Book, Maine Humanities Council, Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, and the Maine Arts Commission promote the cultural regionalism that already exists. We may think of such groups as enabling the supply-side of regionalism. But we must turn to the demand-side and ask, does it work? Do people "read" and write Maine? Is there any evidence of the growth and development of a regional literature, a literary collective identity, nurtured by public patronage? From my examination of several indicators of such demand, the

answer seems to be a clear yes.

- **Anthologies:** Numerous anthologies of Maine writers have been published, with one or two appearing every year. In 1995-96, *The Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance Catalog* listed fourteen anthologies currently in print, including large and beautifully produced collections such as *Maine Speaks* and *The Maine Reader*.<sup>11</sup> The sampling of Maine writing provided by the anthologies is echoed in the state's numerous literary journals, which include *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Café Review*, *Coyote's Journal*, *Mostly Maine*, *Potato Eyes*, *The Puckerbrush Review* (along with *Salt*, perhaps the best known), *The River Review*, and *Salt* (primarily devoted to oral history and photo-documentaries).
- **Local bookstores and libraries:** Every one of the dozens of libraries and bookstores we have examined has a section for books associated with Maine. Typically this is a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, with books on local and state history, photographic essays on the seacoast or mountains, anthologies of Maine poets, and fiction. In bookstores these are sometimes all mixed together, arranged by author. Libraries separate the fiction and non-fiction, although the books are located on the same bookshelf. Some libraries exhibit a further distinction, a double regionalism, where there will be a collection on Maine and another on New England generally. If this pattern were found only in coastal bookstores, one might attribute it to tourism, specifically the market constituted by tourists,

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summer people, and retirees “from away.” The special “Maine section” is found throughout the state, however. The pervasive presence of Maine sections in libraries and book outlets far off the summer visitors’ beaten paths suggests that this is not just marketing, not simply packaging a commodity for buyers “from away.”

Booksellers recognize “Maine literature” as a subject category, and this goes far beyond what the state’s size would seem to warrant.

- **National retailers:** Booksellers recognize “Maine literature” as a subject category, and this goes far beyond what the state’s size would seem to warrant. A simple demonstration of this comes from a search for “Maine literature” on Amazon.com. Since Maine is the fortieth state in population, I compared the result with that for the three states above and below Maine in population.<sup>12</sup> The results were as follows:

Rank	State	State name + literature
37	West Virginia	52
38	Nebraska	34
39	Idaho	29
40	Maine	94
41	New Hampshire	38
42	Hawaii	150
43	Rhode Island	32

We see that with the exception of Hawaii, which shares Maine’s peripheral status and is ethnically distinctive as well, Maine is well above its peers in number of books that present state literature in some form.

- **College and university courses:** The seven campuses of the University of Maine System, without exception, offer courses on Maine writers or, in the case of the Acadian regionalism represented at University of Maine at Fort Kent, regionalist writing. These courses are not mandated by the state legislature, but seem to be the result of an individual faculty member’s enthusiasm combined with the administration’s vague sense of obligation.
- **Lists:** With considerable fanfare and a hefty dose of controversy, the Baxter Society of Portland published its coffee-table compilation of enduring books about Maine. This was *The Mirror of Maine: One Hundred Distinguished Books That Reveal the History of the State and the Life of Its People*.<sup>13</sup> The list has a distinctly anti-quarian flavor—the majority of its titles are out of print and some are nearly impossible to find. Mainers also have had fun quibbling about the choices made. To quote an article appearing in *Down East* magazine, “...there are the omissions, chief of which is E.B. White’s essay collection, *One Man’s Meat?*, which remains the finest writing and the finest thinking about the state. The list substitutes *Charlotte’s Web*, a classic to be sure but White’s children’s story says little about life in Maine and might easily have taken place in Wisconsin.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that such a book has been produced in the first place attests to the firmly held belief that books “reveal” something about this place.
- **Recognition of regional authors:** A survey sponsored by the National Geographic Society (2000) examined the degree to which people from different states and regions recognized and had read authors from their regions. Three things from this survey support our contention that Mainers read Maine. First, at the regional level, New England as a whole leads the nation in terms of having knowledgeable readers, and its readers have high awareness of their



regional authors.<sup>15</sup> Second, looking at the state level, Maine readers have high recognition rates for Maine authors. Third and most surprising, people who move into Maine actually catch up with and even pass people born in Maine in terms of their knowledge of Maine authors. This would not necessarily be surprising either, given that the fact that “movers” (people moving into the state) are more highly educated than “stayers” (people born there). Education doesn’t explain everything, however, for when we looked at a common educational level (bachelor’s degree or higher), we found the same “cowbird” effect of movers catching up to stayers in their knowledge of local authors. This is characteristic of a strong regional literary culture.

All these indicators suggest that Maine literary regionalism is flourishing. While it is hard to say just how much of this state regionalism is directly due to public support, a considerable amount seems to be. Some of the anthologies wouldn’t exist without the support of the Maine Humanities Council, and its various activities celebrating local writers must no doubt develop a market for such writing. Direct support for writers through the Maine Arts Commission, and publicity generated by the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance (e.g., their annual tent at the Maine Festival) all promote not just specific writers and works, but the very idea of Maine literature. Teaching courses on Maine writers at state universities constitutes another form of public support.

An influx of resources can encourage literary production and awareness in general and literary regionalism in particular. State support increases the sheer volume of literary activity in a region, encourages the formation of regional organizations, and establishes networks of communications that can develop the relational dimension of collective identity. All of these institutional impacts make a difference when there has been a prior collective identity. They do not in and of themselves create one, however. Increased literary activity in a region, even if the writers and other

members of the literary system organize themselves internally and develop networks among themselves, does not invariably produce a regional voice.

More than most other states, Maine has both the history and the geography conducive to a strong sense of place. It also has an unusually sharp awareness of the benefits—economic, intellectual, spiritual—that such distinctiveness provides. Therefore, from a policy point of view, the question is not how to nurture a sense of place but instead how to encourage its translation into visible forms of cultural expression.

The indicators of the supply and demand for regionalism that have been discussed suggest avenues for public support and intervention. Public support of such organizations as the Maine Humanities Council, the Maine Arts Commission, and the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance generates large cultural dividends. Direct and indirect sponsorship of local activities—a library exhibit, a poetry reading in a middle school—involve even lower costs, yet go a long way toward cultivating regionalism at the grass roots. Public and private resources working together—here Stephen King offers a model in his various philanthropic activities—can accomplish much in the cultivation and promotion of Maine’s distinctive cultural repertoire. Relatively small inputs of money have big impacts, in large part because cultural organizations have extraordinary human capital resources—creative, imaginative people accustomed to scarcity—who are able to sail a long distance on just a light puff of wind. 🌬️

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Acknowledgment and References on next page.

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## ENDNOTES

1. For a recent discussion advocating cultural tourism in Washington County and other less-visited parts of Maine, see Charles Calhoun's, "Promoting Cultural Tourism" in *Maine Policy Review* (Fall 2000): 92-99.
2. The following discussion draws on Griswold, Wendy and Fredrik Engelstad. "Does the Center Imagine the Periphery?: State Support and Literary Regionalism in Norway and the United States," in *Comparative Social Research* 17 (1998): 129-75. Also, Griswold, Wendy. "Regionalism and Regional Culture," in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Oxford: Elsevier, 2000.
3. The classic study of northern New England's agricultural decline and depopulation was Harold Fisher Wilson's book, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790-1930* (New York: Columbia UP, 1936). A more recent study that revises Wilson's rather apocalyptic conclusion is Hal S. Barron's, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 1984). Barron suggests that while the declines in agriculture and population were real, they were typical of older agrarian communities and not some sign of New England being particularly unfortunate. The quotation is from Barron p. 15.
4. Visiting Committee. David J. Ferrero, Program Officer, Education; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and Joel H. Rosenthal, President, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. "Site Visit Report, Maine Humanities Council, October 17-19, 2001." This report was prepared for the National Endowment for the Humanities.
5. There are only three states in the nation for which English is the leading ancestral group, and these are the three states of northern New England. Only in Maine, Vermont, and Louisiana is French one of the top two.
6. "State Rankings of Selected Public Library Data, 1998," in *The Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 2001. 432. First among the states ranked is South Dakota, second is Massachusetts. In this table the New England states justify their reputation as supporting their public libraries, and the South its reputation for neglecting theirs. Although it is included in the rankings, I am excluding the exceptional case of the District of Columbia.
7. "U.S. Publishers-Geographic Index," in *Literacy Market Place 2002*. Medford: Information Today, 2001. 303-13. I am again excluding the District of Columbia.
8. *A Plan for the Future: 2001-2011*. Maine Humanities Council, 2001.
9. *The Annual Report Issue*. Maine Humanities Council, 2002. 6.
10. Information sheet. Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance, 2002.
11. *The Abridged Field Guide to the Maine Writer; Best Maine Stories: A Century of Short Fiction; Down East Reader: Selections from the Magazine of Maine; Inside Vacationland: New Fiction from the Real Maine; The Maine Reader; Maine Speaks: An Anthology of Maine Literature; Nightshade Short Story Reader; Poems for the Wild Earth; The Quotable Moose: A Contemporary Maine Reader; Red Dust 3 New Writing; Speaking of New England; Trapped Under Ice; Untidy Candles: Anthology of Contemporary Maine Poets; Words from the Curbs at Preble St. Resource Center*.
12. I conducted this research of [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) on April 15, 2002.
13. Sprage, Laura Fecych, ed. *The Mirror of Maine: One Hundred Distinguished Books That Reveal the History of the State and the Life of Its People*. Portland: Baxter Society and U of Maine P, 2001.
14. Doiron, Paul. "The Best Maine Books?" *Down East* (October 2001): 50.
15. Griswold, Wendy and Nathan Wright. 2002. "Cowbirds, Locals, and the Dynamic Endurance for Regionalism." This paper, currently under journal review, is available from the author by request. See Table 10 for regional comparisons, and tables 8 and 9 for Maine movers and stayers.

