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Place-Historical Narratives: Road—or Roadblock—to Sustainability?

Clare Palmer ^a

^a Philosophy , Texas A&M University , USA

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SYMPOSIUM ON *ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES*, BY JOHN O'NEILL,
ALAN HOLLAND AND ANDREW LIGHT (ROUTLEDGE PRESS, 2008)

Place-Historical Narratives: Road— or Roadblock—to Sustainability?

CLARE PALMER

Philosophy, Texas A&M University, USA

Introduction and Overview

O'Neill, Holland and Light's book *Environmental Values* is wide-ranging, rich and thought-provoking. I will explore here just one theme that's central to their account: historical narratives of place. Places matter to us, O'Neill, Holland and Light maintain, because of the ways in which historical stories about places are bound into individual and community identity, and are constitutive of our flourishing. Understanding the ways places matter should thus inform, and shape, our policy-making. This is a key idea in *Environmental Values* and not one widely discussed in environmental ethics (though there are some exceptions).¹ However, there *is* a substantial body of relevant work on time, narrative and place in human geography, environmental psychology and environmental studies broadly conceived, to which O'Neill, Holland and Light rarely directly refer. This work is largely, though not wholly, supportive of what O'Neill, Holland and Light either assume or propose in *empirical* terms about place and identity. However, problems and questions are raised with respect to *evaluative* aspects of O'Neill, Holland and Light's arguments about place. One particularly significant critique of place-oriented ideas—ideas that at least resemble those argued for in *Environmental Values*—has been made by Nordhaus and Shellenberger in their popular and influential book, *Break Through* (2007). Nordhaus and Shellenberger maintain that place-based environmentalism (and though this term may not quite capture O'Neill, Holland and Light's position, the views Nordhaus and Shellenberger attack at least overlap with it) can be a *roadblock* to sustainability, rather than a road towards achieving it. It is on claims like this that I will principally focus here.

First, then, I will summarize what I take to be important claims made by O'Neill, Holland and Light about place, history and narrative. Then I will outline two important objections: (a) that place-orientation is reactionary (I'll suggest that the authors largely resist this difficulty); and (b) that place-orientation can be narrow

Correspondence Address: Clare Palmer, Department of Philosophy, Texas A&M University, 4237 TAMU, College Station, Texas 77843-4237. Email: cpalmer@philosophy.tamu.edu

and selective. Here, I will introduce Nordhaus and Shellenberger's arguments, bringing their work into dialogue with O'Neill, Holland and Light in the context of two key ideas: 'placism' and sustainability. I will consider what 'placism' should be taken to mean, and—using a case study about new power transmission capacity—argue that O'Neill, Holland and Light's account of place is not problematic in some of the ways Nordhaus and Shellenberger suggest that place-oriented accounts must be. However, Nordhaus and Shellenberger's attack on place-orientation in the context of *sustainability* does, I suggest, challenge aspects of O'Neill, Holland and Light's account. I'll argue that their focus on historical place-narratives is too narrow and selective, and that the idea of place with which they are working should, in the context of sustainability, be extended.

2. O'Neill, Holland and Light on Place and Narrative

O'Neill, Holland and Light do not provide a definition of what they mean by their use of the term 'place', a term that's widely agreed to be contested (see Windsor & McVey, 2005). I'll adopt Cresswell's (2004, p. 12) definition of 'place' here: 'Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power'. Although the authors do not actually use this definition, the idea of place as 'space invested with meaning' seems very close to what they intend, and they maintain several times that power relations are significant but overlooked in discussions of place.

A number of key ideas are central to O'Neill, Holland and Light's account of place. I pick these out as follows:

- (a) Places matter to people, not just as functional environments—bundles of useful properties—but also as embodying narratives of peoples' lives, of communities' histories, and of the broader, non-human world in which we are situated.
- (b) These place-historical narratives need not concern grand, scenic or wild environments, but rather the actual places where people live.
- (c) Places form part of an individual's self-identity and also part of the identity of communities, fulfilling basic human needs of affiliation and community (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 194).
- (d) The loss or destruction of particular environments can therefore be an assault on individuals' identities, on ways of life, and on the coherence of communities.
- (e) Since the story of a place is unique and historical, and since nothing can compensate for the loss of goods of affiliation and community, neither financial compensation nor the re-creation of an apparently identical place (for instance, something that appears visually identical) can substitute for the loss of any particular place. The creation of a place that looks identical would have a different *story* (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 146).
- (f) An important task for conservation, then, is 'how best to continue the narrative of this place' and how to make the future 'a realization of the potential of the past' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 156).
- (g) This does not rule out changes to places; narratives can be narratives of transformation, occasionally even containing radical changes. But 'many dramatic changes will be inappropriate because of scale, pace or source'

though equally, freeze-framing and allowing no change at all may fail to reflect the narrative of place.

- (h) One difficulty: there may be *competing* narratives of any place ‘different histories to which our decisions have to be answerable’ (O’Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 157).
- (i) The non-human world has its own narratives, including the processes of natural selection; these may be on a different scale from human narratives.
- (j) Since places are not substitutable, and the loss of the goods particular places provide cannot be compensated for, a key element of sustainability is to sustain places into the future ‘as a realization of the potential of the past’. This should form part of an account of sustainability based on needs or human flourishing across dimensions (rather than so-called ‘substitutable’ human preferences).

Much of this sounds very plausible. In fact, one of the surprising things about *Environmental Values* is that the authors do not use existing empirical evidence to support these claims, in particular the claims about place and identity. Drawing on this research would, to some degree at least, underpin and certainly help to clarify and develop the authors’ position. It would also allow O’Neill, Holland and Light to consider empirical research that may challenge aspects of their account of place. For instance, empirical research suggests that while many people do develop a form of place identity, place does not seem to be important to *all* individuals’ identity; and the degree which places matter to people varies by gender, by age and by culture, among other things (see, for instance, Rollero & de Piccali, 2010). Empirical research also suggests that places can be important to people in *negative* ways, as recent studies of topophobia suggest (see, for example, Ruan & Hogben, 2007); and many people feel ambivalent about, negative towards or even desirous of destroying their place. It is not clear how these kinds of interpretations of place fit into O’Neill, Holland and Light’s account. Some authors go so far as to argue that owing to constant movement and other rapid social change, it is impossible for contemporary Westerners to develop a sense of place (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 2).

However, I’m not going to focus on these empirical complications here. I will just accept that O’Neill, Holland and Light are broadly right in their empirical/descriptive claims about the ways and degrees in which places matter to people. I want instead to engage with their related claims about *Value*: that because places matter to people, and play a key role in their flourishing, a primary task both of conservation and sustainability is to ensure that place-narratives continue into the future in appropriate ways, ways that make the future a realization of the potential of the past and in doing so protect and promote human flourishing.

3. Positively Valuing Place Narratives: Two Problems

The rise of arguments that particular places are significant to communal and individual identities has triggered the development of a literature in geography and environmental studies that is critical of the possible implications of such arguments. Two concerns have been central.

First, there is concern that a focus on place, and narratives of place, can be *reactionary*, leading to the development of positions from which some things, people

or practices are seen as ‘in place’ and others as ‘out of place’. This can lead to the exclusion of those people, things or practices perceived as transgressing, and such exclusions can cause harm (see, for instance, Cresswell, 1996, 2004, p. 11). Important though this critique can be of *some* accounts of place, O’Neill, Holland and Light’s account largely escapes such criticisms because they accept that places can have competing narratives. Those who might be argued to be ‘out of place’ on one narrative view—say, immigrant or minority groups—have their *own* narrative of place that matters to *them*. Even though the authors eschew giving guidance as to how to make policy in a situation of competing narratives, theirs is not an essentialist account. Additionally, the authors also argue that new things—such as non-native plants or animals, for instance—can become part of a story of a particular place, enriching, rather than dislocating, the story that is told. Nonetheless, there are some concerns here, for there may be some narratives that have been altogether silenced, that ‘dare not speak their name’. I will say something about this later.

Secondly, it is argued that historical narratives of place can be narrow and selective, both in terms of what they pick out to remember, and in the ways in which they emphasize what has—and does—contribute to making places what they are. This matters, because narrow and selective narratives can block changes that for other reasons are important; in particular for reasons to do with *sustainability*. While recognizing the contested nature of the term ‘sustainability’, I am going to accept in this paper that, in a very general way, the pursuit of sustainability is desirable, so that beliefs, attitudes and practices that set it back are at least *prima facie* worrying. And it is on worries of this kind that I will largely focus here. I will begin by outlining the questions that Nordhaus and Shellenberger raise, concerning what they call ‘place-based environmentalism’.

4. Nordhaus and Shellenberger: *Breakthrough*

Nordhaus and Shellenberger object to all forms of environmentalism that focus on particular places (as opposed to, say, global justice or climate change). Most specifically, however, they target positions that emphasize the central role of local people; positions that maintain, for instance, that local people should be prioritized as decision-makers about what happens in their own particular places, or that they are best placed to judge what is ‘place-appropriate’ and what is ‘out of place’ or ‘out of scale’ in their locale. They argue that the loyalty of people to their places is a ‘prejudice of place’ which they call *placism*, and that it has the same form as sexism or racism: ‘We no longer believe it is justified to confine our affections or reserve our loyalties to a particular race. Why then do we believe we are justified in reserving our loyalties for a particular place?’ (Nordhaus & Shellenberger, 2007, p. 101). What is particularly interesting here is that Nordhaus and Shellenberger appear to be targeting not only what we could call ‘economic NIMBYism’ (Not in My Backyard; concerns about place based on property value or substitutable preferences), but what Norton and Hannon (1997) approvingly call ‘true, place-oriented NIMBYism’, and views in the ballpark, at least, of O’Neill, Holland and Light’s. Decisions taken based on the meaning and significance of some place to those who live there, Nordhaus and Shellenberger maintain, may be a roadblock to changes that promote global sustainability.

It is these points that I want think through in relation to the account of place in *Environmental values*. First, I will consider whether O'Neill, Holland and Light's account does privilege local voices in terms of policy-making for places. Then—using a case study—I will think about the implications of their view in Nordhaus and Shellenberger's terms: with respect both to 'placism' and to sustainability.

Does the account of place in *Environmental Values* privilege local people? I think there's a sense in which it does, although there is little that is specific about scale and boundary-drawing, and the authors do not clearly make localist claims. There are non-local place identities that could fit their argument about place-narratives: for instance, someone could dedicate much time to researching into a place that they only rarely visit (say the Arctic) and still create a deeply-informed narrative about change and continuity, be a member of a closely-knit community of Arctic researchers, and have a vision of how human actions in the Arctic in the future could best fulfill the potential of the past. Outsiders may be able to 'read' objective features of some location enough to be able to see what changes would be coherent and incoherent in that location, given what's currently there; they could have a 'sense of place' without place attachment or identity. However, though non-local cases *could* fit this model, such cases would be highly unusual. For most people, to know about 'particular beings and places and their particular histories' requires a closeness, intimacy and understanding that could only come from living within a local community, or at least spending considerable periods of time embedded there.

This is evident in the specific cases the authors discuss. For instance, the 'Slate Quarry' case (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 155) draws on the history of a local community, where the long-gone local boys whose boots and coats now rot in abandoned mining huts once lived. Being local—moving around in a particular area, coming to recognize its corners and contours, becoming emotionally, subjectively attached to it, and constructing some sense of where it begins and ends—is the commonest way of coming to know somewhere as a 'space invested by meaning'. Indeed, O'Neill, Holland and Light's account of place seems close to Freya Mathews' (1999) idea of *nativism*: 'Layers and layers of significance accrete, as our lives unfold amid familiar spaces, significance that can for us never be produced in any other setting. The setting itself infiltrates our identity. This irreplaceable significance of our own place, or places for us, binds us to them. We become their natives'. And while, as psychological research shows, place-attachment can develop fairly swiftly, place-identity takes a long time to form. So, it is not surprising that it is primarily manifested by long-resident local people within local communities, and that such people, if forcibly displaced, are still affected by this displacement decades later (Windsor & Mcvey, 2005). It is to these people that place-narrative matters most intensely; local people are, after all, both the tellers of the tale (or one version of it at least), as well as partly the *makers* of the tale; and (we might think) it is their flourishing that is affected by what happens. Outsiders normally neither know nor care enough about a place to make judgments about the best way of fulfilling the narrative of the past. So, I think O'Neill, Holland and Light do suggest that those who live in a place, those whose identity is bound up with it, *should* be prioritized in terms of decisions about 'how best to continue the narrative of places': they know the place, and their flourishing, in part, depends on it. It is this that raises the very worries that Nordhaus and Shellenberger express.

5. Power Transmission Lines in Suffolk: A Case Study

It is helpful here, I think, to consider a particular case. Proposals are currently being put forward both in the US and UK to install new, above ground, high voltage transmission lines. The sum of US\$10.9 billion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, for example, was dedicated to the Smart Grid Reinvestment Program, which includes the construction of new transmission capability. In the UK, a proposed new line through Suffolk would have towers 50 meters high and carry 400 kv of electricity. At the moment, the route for the new line has not been decided; four possible routes are being discussed. All four face opposition from those who would be local to them. Leaving aside unsettled issues about human health, the main objections echo the place-historical concerns O'Neill, Holland and Light raise: the new transmission lines will disturb the land on which they are built, creating 'scars on the landscape'; they are visually intrusive, and on account of their size, scale, composition, newness and so on they are not appropriate changes for the places for which they are proposed (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 177). On the other hand, those making the proposals argue that they are crucial for sustainability. The new high voltage power lines are, first, more energy efficient than existing lines (they leak less electricity in transmission). Second, they connect new, low-carbon energy sources such as offshore wind farms or nuclear power stations to mass markets for their electricity.

It seems as though O'Neill, Holland and Light would be supportive of those resisting the Suffolk pylons. Take, for instance, Milden Village, Suffolk: a small parish in southern England with a population of about 100. The parish contains the Milden Thicks Site of Special Scientific Interest (an ancient woodland area) and the remains of Milden Castle-and-Bailey on Foxburrow Hill, built in the 12th century—a designated Scheduled Ancient Monument. The high-transmission cable would certainly significantly change Milden, as campaigners have not been slow to point out. The pylons are new; the village is ancient. Pylons would tower over the village, the historic mound and the woods; they are immense in scale; the village is small, and low-lying. The pylons are stark, sharp, metallic, modern; the village is worn smooth, with curved surfaces and soft rounded shapes. The main sound now is birdsong and leaves; the high-voltage cables will hum. The people who live there chose to live or to remain there because of these qualities of rural peacefulness and deeply embedded cultural and agricultural history. It is hard to see how any historical narrative of place could make the high-voltage transmission cable the kind of change that would be 'appropriate' in 'scale, pace and source'.

The obvious difficulty, though, is that either the cable runs through somewhere else, or it does not run at all. (It is conceivable that it could run underground, and some campaigners are arguing for this; but underground cabling is extremely expensive and in itself not environmentally unproblematic.) All four of the proposed routes for the high-transmission cable run through ancient areas like Milden; and without the cable it is impossible to get the lower carbon electricity from remote and offshore locations to the consumer. Without these transmission lines and since the demand for electricity will not drop in any related way (I think it is implausible to argue that, in the real world, energy savings will do the trick), some *other* place will need to host that electricity production, probably by continuing to use, or house

new-build, gas or coal fired power stations. In addition, the generation of power by coal rather than renewables will increase CO₂ emissions, and this will have global consequences—consequences that affect *other people's* local places. And *those* affected places might be impoverished farmers in the Bangladesh delta, or slum dwellers in south America who depend on glacial melt for drinking water. Nordhaus and Shellenberger would maintain that for local residents to resist the pylons would be ‘placist’: locally prejudiced, exclusively reserving loyalty and affection for the place in which they live; *and* that this resistance threatens global sustainability.

In the rest of this paper, I want to do two things. First, I will look more closely at the idea of ‘placism’. Does attachment to a particular place really resemble racism or sexism? I will argue that in most cases—including O’Neill, Holland and Light’s—other analogies are more appropriate; placism is not a useful term. On the other hand, the worries about sustainability do have some plausibility. So, I will argue that the account of place our authors offer should be extended to include other place-oriented factors alongside historical narratives, at least in the context of sustainability.

6. Privileging Place

If to privilege place really were like racism or sexism in form, then it would be *prima facie* troubling (just as many have been troubled by the accusation that they are ‘speciesist’). But how could one provide evidence for such a claim? It is difficult even to pin down the comparison, since racism, sexism and speciesism are all extremely complex; they are variously conceived of as values, attitudes or practices,² or as some combination of these; and have been explained, interpreted, justified and condemned in a variety of different ways. Let’s say that we can identify a common core: for all three, the members of one group are understood to be superior in morally relevant ways, or (to use Holland, 1984) are morally entitled to prefer their own interests over the equivalent interests of members of the other group.

Now, it is sometimes asserted that such claims are just blind prejudices, lacking in justifying reasons. And many definitions of these terms do imply this. So, for instance, Barbara Orlans (1998, p. 62) says of speciesism: ‘Speciesism is the view that members of a particular species (in this case *homo sapiens*) are superior to other species simply by virtue of the individual’s membership in that species.’ However, as Brennan (2003) has pointed out, such ‘bare’ accounts of racism, sexism or speciesism are rare. Much more frequently, *reasons* are offered as to why the groups are, in at least some respects, of different value, or one group is to be prioritized over another. It is because there are *morally relevant differences* between the groups concerned, not just bare race/species/sex membership; one group is, for instance, less *rational* than another, and rationality is morally relevant. Of course, these reasons may be, and frequently are, false. They may pick out factors as being of moral relevance when they are not; and/or claim that members of the ‘inferior’ group lack morally-relevant features that they do in fact possess; and/or fail to apply the reasons consistently across groups.

How does this relate to ‘placism’? There are, I think, ‘bare’ placisms that claim superiority or at least priority for particular places just because someone is born there or lives there. Sporting loyalties are often like this. But Nordhaus and

Shellenberger want us to imagine that all forms of place-privileging are of this kind, based either on unreasoned prejudice or on reasons that are shallowly self-serving. However, this is mistaken: not all place-privileging views *are* like this. O'Neill, Holland and Light, in particular, offer *plausible reasons* for the significance of place as central to human flourishing and to the fundamental, non-substitutable goods of affiliation and community. In this sense their work differs from racist and sexist claims (at least), since the reasons offered to support racism/sexism (defined as above) are *not plausible*.

The authors' place-privileging is also not like racism, sexism (and so forth) in other ways, since it is not fundamentally *comparative*. It is not about the relationship between groups or the privileging of one group over another. O'Neill, Holland and Light are interested in the way in which places matter to people whose lives are bound up with them, not the way that places evaluatively compare to other places. One could in principle be attached to a place in their sense without there actually *being* any other places; but one could not be racist if there were no other races. *Implicitly*, this kind of place-identity has implications for other places, and this can be worrying, as I will shortly argue. Yet to identify with one's own place is not necessarily to think that other places are *less good* than one's own.

Racism and sexism are, I think, the wrong sorts of analogy for conceptualizing attachment to place. The ways we know places are more like the ways we 'know people in their concrete particularity' (Jagger, quoted in D.M. Smith, 2000, p. 83) than the ways we know 'races' or 'sexes'. O'Neill, Holland and Light suggest this themselves with their language of 'betrayal' and 'bribery' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 78) and their discussion of family relations in the context of place (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 80). To develop this comparison further, it's useful to build on arguments put forward by Mary Midgley (1983). Midgley compares certain forms of speciesism to the closeness of family relations in order to defend the claim that some forms of preferential treatment are not irrational prejudice, but rather are necessary for human flourishing, given the kind of bond-forming creatures we are. And Midgley is surely right about this. Parents' attachments, narratives and self-identities are deeply bound up with those of their children. Harm to a child is traumatic to its parents; parents generally want their child to grow up to fulfill the best trajectory that is possible, given the abilities and constraints the child has. This does not mean that a parent thinks that other people's children are inferior, or that, in any broader sense, other children's interests are less important than their own child's interests. As Midgley argues, 'the special interest which parents feel in their own children is not a prejudice... these habits of thought and action are not unfair, though they can probably be called discriminatory' (1983, p. 102). A parent has a special relationship to his or her *own* child's interests that they do not have to other people's children, but this does not make a parent 'other childist'. Rather, we can think of this in terms of *special obligation*. We have special obligations to our children because we created them, we committed ourselves to them, for both these reasons they are dependent on us, and because the bonds formed by these relations are essential to human flourishing. This does not mean, as Midgley (1983, p. 104) points out (and I'll return to this point later) that such special obligations are *overwhelming*. We may occasionally need to subordinate them to other concerns. However they are not, at least, irrational, and they do not require us to maintain others' inferiority.

So, if we model place-attachment and identity on something like family relations, we do not need to think that other places are inferior in order for our loyalty, in terms of fulfilling the potential of place narrative, to lie with the particular place with which we identify. Indeed, it is plausible to go a step further in the parallel with family relations. Just as constant interaction with, and long-term knowledge of, our family members may mean that we are (to use Buege's [1996, p. 78] term) 'epistemologically privileged' with respect to those individuals, so also constant interaction with, and long-term knowledge of, particular *places* may also lead to epistemological privilege with respect to that place. Of course, this is not universally true; and such epistemological privilege may be contested by others who claim to 'know' a place in a different way (this may, of course, happen with family members too). But the idea of epistemological privilege with respect to place may assist in underpinning a claim to special obligation.

What is important here is that neither place-loyalty nor epistemological privilege requires the affirmation of the inferiority of other places. The residents of Mildens could think it is perfectly permissible for the residents of Groton (on proposed Transmission Route 3) to object to the cable coming through their medieval village too; and may even accept that their cause is just as reasonable. Yet the Mildens residents' time can still be spent defending Mildens, since that's where their commitment, loyalty, and special knowledge lies.

However, there are (at least) two objections to the use of the language of 'special relation' and 'special obligation' for our relation to particular places.

- (1) O'Neill, Holland and Light themselves reject the language of special obligation as being backward-looking in the wrong kind of way. Special obligations, they claim, require contracts, or something like promises—some kind of voluntary commitment in the past. Yet 'In the context of conservation, we are not constrained by the past in virtue of any promises we have made; the obligations we have to the past, if that is a proper way to speak here, are entirely non-voluntary' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 156). Admittedly, some accounts of special obligations do maintain that they must be voluntarily undertaken, though what this means is contested (it is sometimes argued that just accepting the benefits that flow from a relationship is enough to generate the special obligations that normally go with the relationship, even if one never explicitly consented to them or promised to undertake them). Many special relations (such as being someone's child or sister), however, are *not* entered into voluntarily. And some relations that were entered voluntarily cannot be exited from (such as being a parent); as Scheffler (2002, p. 116) points out, our own wills are not the only source of all our special responsibilities. It is at least possible to argue that we have non-voluntary special obligations.
- (2) A second, more obvious problem is that it makes no sense to talk of special obligations to places, since places are not the kinds of things to which one can have obligations at all. This objection seems right, if we take 'place' to mean something like 'landscape' or 'ecosystem'. However, the meaning that places have is about the meaning places have to *people*—to the ongoing human communities, the people who remember the miners up in the quarries,

or the huge open skies of Suffolk winter nights. If commitment to place is about commitment to human communities *in place* (as O'Neill, Holland and Light suggest), and these 'placed communities' depend on the continuing commitment of those that constitute them, then the language of special obligations sounds much less implausible. Imagine, for instance, a (fictional) boy Ted, who grew up in Milden, immersed in the community there, was a choir boy at Milden's medieval church, who returns after college to begin an internet start-up from his parents' home. He knows everyone in the village well; he has stolen their apples, eaten dinner at their houses, and by now even slept with a few of them. Then the pylon plan emerges. The local community comes together to object, arguing that the pylons would be out of place, inappropriate historically, culturally, aesthetically and so on. But not Ted. His internet start-up business, he reckons, would benefit from a more reliable electricity supply. (Let's just imagine that he is right about this.) So, Ted supports the pylon project, and refuses to join the local community in their defense of Milden's place-narrative. Ted's support for the pylon project is a breach—to use O'Neill, Holland and Light's language, a betrayal—of his special obligations to the community that formed him, of which he remains a part, that to some degree depends on him, and which is inextricably bound up with the particular land in which it's located. To say that Ted has obligations to Milden is to say that he has obligations towards the particular place-identified community in Milden. Ted is rejecting these obligations not because he thinks that he has another, conflicting and stronger moral commitment (and there could be such a reason, for instance, a reason to do with more basic human flourishing) but on account of a relatively small economic gain to himself.

So Nordhaus and Shellenberger may be right to argue that there can be problematic placisms, based on unjustified ideas of the superiority of some place over other places *just because* one was born or lives there. Yet as O'Neill, Holland and Light maintain, in other cases there are good *reasons* why we have special relations—and special obligations—to particular place-identified communities. This does not, however, resolve the second issue about which Nordhaus and Shellenberger are concerned. For what is at stake here is not just preferring to protect our own place over protecting other places (that is, just *not-assisting* others). There's also the second worry: that in focusing on developing or protecting one's own place-narrative, other communities and places are actually *burdened (or harmed)*; and movement towards global sustainability may be set back. This is more problematic, and (I think) more difficult for O'Neill, Holland and Light to resist; and I suggest it requires their account of place-historic narrative to be revised, even to pursue sustainability understood in their own terms.

7. The Temporal Perspective

O'Neill, Holland and Light urge us to adopt 'a temporal perspective' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 155), policies for futures that continue, sustain and fulfill, rather than betray or distort, the meaningful past. Having policies for futures that continue, sustain and fulfill, rather than betray or distort, the meaningful past. Although I do not want to

argue here that this place-historical focus is wrong, I suggest that it's narrow in two key ways: (a) it privileges an account of the temporal over the spatial; and (b) it does not acknowledge important ways in which place-historical narratives, and the identities they both construct and are constructed by, may be selective. This is problematic in the context of sustainability (not *only* in this context, but this is the context on which I will focus here).

(a) *Spatial Concerns*

In suggesting that O'Neill, Holland and Light's account emphasizes *time* at the expense of *space*, I am not suggesting that there is no spatial element in their account of place (see Massey, 1994 for discussion of these distinctions). The idea of place as 'space invested with meaning' is obviously, by definition, spatial. Rather, I want to argue that to make policy about a place only by considering *that* place's meaning over time is to miss the ways in which that place is connected to other places, both past and present. The narrative of *my* place is entangled with the narratives of *other people's* places; and what happens in one place may be dependent on, or significantly impact what happens in other places, including places that are geographically remote. As Cresswell argues: 'places need to be understood as sites that are connected to others around the world in constantly evolving networks which are social, cultural and natural/environmental. Places need to be understood through the paths that lead in and out' (2004, p. 43)—that is, not only through paths that look backwards and forwards.

Even on a small-scale, policies to preserve one place can have implications for other peoples' places, places that may be relatively close. For instance, Johnson discusses the construction of the so-called Cutteslowe Walls in Oxford, where 'the residents of the middle-class area...erected walls, denying access for the residents of a neighbouring council-housing estate' (Johnson, 1991, p. 140), in order to prevent an increase in cut-through traffic from vehicles accessing the main road. This could be construed as protecting Cutteslowe's place-historical narrative, but the implications for the narrative of *someone else's* place, where someone else is relatively poor, were significant. These questions arise on a much broader scale in a world of global markets and other mediated relations, where distances, for instance between producers and consumers, polluters and the effects of pollution, may be immense (Harvey, 1993, p. 56). These spatial factors are surely just as important in terms of what *makes* a place as the interpretation of what has happened in the past in the area imagined to be 'this place.' By looking at the way our place relates to other places, we can see how what we are doing—or preventing—may harm or damage others, and how their place-narrative intersects with ours. As I will suggest in the conclusion, this has to be important in thinking about sustainability, even sustainability understood in terms of sustaining place narratives.

(b) *Concerns about Selectivity*

A further, related, concern about place-historical narratives concerns what else—aside from other *places*—may be missing. Individual memory is notoriously unreliable; community memories likewise. Stories about places are constructed as much as recalled. Additionally, certain things 'stand out for attention' in memory, while others are invisible. Places are, by the definition I adopted earlier 'spaces

invested with meaning in the context of power'. It's the rotting male miners' boots that the former mining community reveres in developing its place-historic narrative, rather than the women who had to carry large tubs of water from the street and 'poss' the filthy clothes with a heavy stick, often while pregnant (which they were much of the time) and sometimes after episodes of domestic violence. Feminist historians have long noted how the activities of women disappear or are backgrounded in dominant narratives of a male past. In the case of women, if the memory is not entirely lost, alternative narratives of place can be constructed (as has been done in the case of Welsh mining communities, though these recovered histories probably do not penetrate beyond the academic sphere). Some lost narratives—the hidden history of gay Welsh miners, perhaps—are likely to remain lost, because no one ever dared to speak them.

However, if we take a concern about sustainability seriously, we need to think about not only *whose* narrative is missing, but *what is assumed* in the narrative, what is invisible, that does not 'stand out for attention', but which is nonetheless critical to the story. While the Welsh mining community preserves the mining narrative told by the rotting miners' boots, for example, the animals whose skins actually made the boots are invisible, though without these animals' deaths the boots would not exist. Suppose the climb, the magnificent views, the isolation, of driving the Pass of the Cattle in order to swoop into Applecross in Scotland has become part of what the place means to those who live there, as it well might. Just being able to access that meaning requires the material of the car that's being driven, the petrol that fuels the car, the plastics in the car seats, and so on. Meanings are underpinned by materials, and driven by energy: but these do not form part of the narrative, though without these materials and energy, the narrative could not take the shape it has. Both in terms of spatiality and narrative selectivity, a full understanding of place should include more than the historical factors O'Neill, Holland and Light emphasize. We also need to think about the ways one place is dependent, or impacts, on other places, and about the beings, things and energies on which our narratives of place depend.

(c) *Milden's Narrative*

Let's return to Milden. To understand Milden's place-narrative, we could look back at its history, talk to its residents about the meaning it has for them, ask them what they think is appropriate to Milden, and project forward, to develop a fulfilling continuance of Milden's place-narrative based on their 'epistemological privilege'. My worry here is that this gives a restricted account of Milden as a place. A historical place-narrative may take Milden to be self-contained, perhaps with occasional outside incursions. Yet Milden also has had impacts on other places, impacts that might not be captured in the existing place identity of its residents, even if they have lived in Milden for generations. There are *routes* in and out of Milden, not just *roots* in the past. Milden has had international links through war and trade for millennia, as the discovery of nearby Viking ship burial sites illustrates. And right now, the contemporary residents of Milden both depend on, and impact on, other places. There's a constant flow of vehicles, materials, power, goods, people and services in and out of Milden, though this may not form part of anyone's place identity or place-historic narrative. Specifically, electricity flows into Milden, for residential,

business and agricultural uses; that electricity is generated somewhere, and the CO₂ and other emissions produced by its residents when they consume electricity also go somewhere. The residents of Milden may perceive the pylons and transmission cables as an intrusion; for electricity is likely invisible in their narrative of place. It's ordinary, everyday; it only becomes visible if it stops. However without electricity, their narratives would look completely different; the whole story of Milden includes its electrification (along with its dependence on the private car, and its long-term use of oil-based fertilizers).

What does this mean with respect to the high-voltage transmission line? I am not proposing a clear answer. I am not suggesting that (fictional) Ted would be right to welcome the installation of the pylons (and if he is right, he's right for the wrong reason). What I am suggesting is that fuller, more complete place narratives need to include, but also to look beyond, the meaningful stories of the past, present and future of particular places as told by individuals and communities embedded within them. Materially, Milden has become the place it is, and continues to function because of electricity; it is entangled in electricity distribution and consumption; the electricity it already consumes impacts on other people's places, both in the present and in the future. A narrative that is true to place in a broader than historical sense needs to take into account factors past and present that stretch in a spatial, global sense far beyond the place itself, that may include the place-narratives of far distant people, and even those not yet born into other places.

8. In Conclusion: Sustainability

My title asks whether place-historical narratives are a road, or a roadblock, to sustainability. My answer is that they can be both. Sustainability can mean many things, as O'Neill, Holland and Light rightly maintain (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 184). First: there's a fairly straightforward way in which O'Neill, Holland and Light's place-historical narrative approach can be seen, on some occasions at least, as a roadblock to sustainability. *If* sustainability is taken in the way they reject, in terms of human welfare/natural capital, where goods are substitutable and we aim at best outcomes, protecting the trajectory of particular places can stand in the way of developments that—in this sense—promote sustainability (such as the wind farm on Cape Cod, a case that exercises Nordhaus and Shellenberger). But what's interesting is that even on the account of sustainability that our authors give, place-historical narrative could in *some* cases, though certainly not in *all* cases, also be a roadblock to sustainability.

O'Neill, Holland and Light suggest that sustainability should be understood as being about 'preserving the future as a realization of the potential of the past' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2008, p. 201). This view of sustainability seems very close to Norton's (2005, p. 371) idea of 'community identity values,' where 'values are developed and passed from generation to generation, creating cohesiveness within human communities, but also binding individuals and communities to their natural habitat.' But if this is what's valued, then we need to think about what to do when preserving the future of *one* place or *one* community's identity values means disrupting, or contributing to the disruption, of the future of other places—especially where there's a potential to disrupt more futures than are preserved. If protecting and fulfilling one

place-narrative comes at the expense of other place narratives, this would appear to bring about a loss of sustainability even on O'Neill, Holland and Light's terms.

This concern is not, I think, an insuperable one. One obvious response here would be to adopt a policy for sustainability that preserves the *greatest number* of futures as a realization of the potential of their pasts. I imagine that O'Neill, Holland and Light will resist this formulation, since it introduces through the back door the very calculation and potential for trade-offs of goods that they set out to reject. That is, I think they would object to the view that if preserving futures as potentials of the past is what's important, it's best to preserve more such futures rather than fewer such futures, even though this means the violation of some. Their objection, though, immediately raises Scheffler's (1984, p. 80) consequentialist worry: that it is irrational to be committed to a view that upholds 'restriction S such that it is . . . impermissible to violate restriction S in circumstances where doing so would prevent a still greater number of equally-weighty violations of S, but would have no other morally relevant consequences'. (I take restriction S here to mean something like 'a restriction on violating place narratives'.) Yet perhaps the family relations model of place-loyalty can provide resources to resist Scheffler's concern. An alternative, less calculative, approach also seems compatible with our authors' view, although I cannot develop such an account in detail here. This approach would recognize the claims of others to their places; be closely attentive to the ways in which protecting one's own place may impact on other places; apply (to use Midgley's [1983, p. 102] terms) less formal ideas to think through the relative strengths and weakness of one's own and others' place claims, and be willing to put others' place-claims first, where the impacts of not doing so are very significant either in degree, reach or over time.

To conclude, then, as O'Neill, Holland and Light maintain, place-identity is formed by the narratives we tell about particular places, and these place identities, closely tied to particular communities, are plausibly constitutive parts of what it is for humans to flourish. However we need to think carefully and critically about the place narratives we tell, to consider what is missing from them, how our narratives intersect with those of other places, and with the world as a whole. We should see place narratives as a network of linked stories, often overlapping, competing and contested over time and over space, where the sustaining of one story has implications for many others, regionally, nationally and globally.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Buege (1996), Cheney (1989), Norton (2005), Norton and Hannon (1997), M. Smith (2001). Narrative has also featured in some versions of environmental virtue ethics, but here the emphasis on story is not place-historical.

² Fjellstrom (2002) helpfully distinguishes between attitudes, practices/behavior and values in this context.

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