



ESSAY

Words, River, Changes: Writing Lewiston, Maine

Jane Costlow

Bates College, Lewiston, Maine, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay describes and reflects on the central river of a small post-industrial city in Maine (USA), interweaving the author's experience of place with the voices of three local poets, as a way of considering how the city and its river have been represented—as pastoral, abject, beautiful, and hybrid.

KEYWORDS

Androscoggin River, Lewiston Maine, Marsden Hartley, Robert Chute, Susann Pelletier, hybrid, abject, pastoral

There is something unfathomably essential about continually perceiving things anew [...] An elegy for forgetting. A map of erasure. Ground we must dig to find the root of our current being. The inexplicable joy and irreducible complexity that accompanies simply standing in place.

—Ross Gay & Richard Wehrenberg, “River”

Lewiston–Auburn (also known as L–A) is a community of 60,000, made up of two separate municipalities which sit on either side of the Androscoggin River in Maine (USA). Once a center of the textile and shoe industries, that industry is now gone; the cities are economically challenged, and include the poorest census tracts in the state¹. The Androscoggin River, once severely polluted, is now clean enough to support aquatic life and recreation. As the river has been transformed, so the cities have sought to transform themselves through efforts by municipal governments, local NGOs, and river enthusiasts. City projects that focus on the river and its banks are sometimes articulated in terms of “turning toward the river”; fifty years ago, the river was so badly polluted that communities

¹ Downtown Lewiston includes three of the state's four poorest census tracts; the fourth is in Auburn (Ferguson & Keefe, 2019).

turned away from it, both literally and figuratively. For most of its history the community was—like the state where it is situated—almost entirely white. That began to change dramatically in the early 2000's, when Somali families began arriving and making the cities their home. According to 2021 data from the US Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), Lewiston is now approximately 15% non-white.

My reflections here are presented in essayistic form, combining my own engagement with this landscape with reflections on those who have spoken about the cities and their river—the words of poets, storytellers and city planners as well as “street terms” that are both degrading and laudatory. These reflections are informed by living in a mixed-income neighborhood near the river, by teaching that has focused on the river and often involved community-engaged projects, and by ongoing participation in local conservation groups. I draw inspiration from the work of cultural critic Lucy Lippard, who asks us to reflect on our need for place and how places are always already hybrid; from the American essayist Wendell Berry, whose essays are models of how to take place seriously; and from contemporary poet Ross Gay, whose chapbook *River* reminds us that even “effaced” places deserve to be written about.

Walking Changes

The Androscoggin changes nothing/of its flowing...

— Edmund Marsden Hartley, “The Bend of the Androscoggin”

On a bitter morning in late January, nothing about the Androscoggin seems to be flowing. I know, of course, that water is moving beneath the ice, but what is visible is as solid and cold as stone. Beneath the railroad bridge and in the broads between the Auburn Riverwalk and Simard-Payne Park, ice covers the whole expanse of water; south of the Green Bridge ice reaches up river from downstream rapids. The battered wooden houses of Laurel Hill on the Auburn side look brittle in the cold, plumes of smoke chasing out from chimneys in a stiff north wind. The three brick arches of the canal outflow under Continental Mill; the hulk of the empty mill itself; the chain-link-encircled lot with the Future Home of Museum L–A: all are immobile and deserted. “The Androscoggin changes nothing of its flowing [...]”(Hartley, 1987a, p. 261). I let Hartley's line hum inside me as I make the loop along the river. Other than those plumes of smoke and a stray crow, I'm the only thing moving. I convert his statement into a question, what changes? and keep moving through a place that can be used as emblem for all kinds of claims and multiple monikers: post-industrial decay; urban revitalization; environmental cleanup; dirty Lew, mighty Androscoggin; hybrid, invisible, abject, home.

A month later we are in the middle of record warmth, over 60 degrees F and sunny. This is climate change, I think—but it feels great. What has changed is more than just the temperature: the river is almost completely unfettered of ice, my body is loose, my jacket unzipped, and where I was the only person out in January, now there are scores of people: mothers and kids, office workers on lunchbreak, homeless people hanging out with all their belongings. A Somali guy on a bike says hello and asks me how I am doing; a woman coming out of Place Ste. Marie sees me looking at yard ornaments and

greet me with a comment about how her Christmas decorations are still up... A man with a shopping cart heads into the woods behind Bonney Park, looking like he just wandered in from a Cormac McCarthy dystopia. And finally, as I head up toward West Pitch Park, there's a middle-aged woman with seven girls (I count them: seven), and they are all wearing matching black-checked dresses and light pink winter coats.

Most of them have taken the pink coats off. They're taking cell-phone pictures of runoff gushing into the river, and I wonder if they are part of a religious cult or just coming home from dance lessons.

When the painter Marsden Hartley returned to Lewiston in the 1930's, he wrote a series of poems devoted to both the city and the river. Hartley had been born in 1877 in Lewiston and called it his "native city," but he left after a difficult childhood for New York and Europe, where he encountered the work of artists from Picasso and Kandinsky to Franz Marc. After a sojourn in the American southwest he came back to Maine. In *Lewiston is a Pleasant Place* (Hartley, 1987b) he tells us he admired the city "because/it is part of the secret sacred rite/of love of place"² (p. 254). In the poem *The Bend of the Androscoggin* he proclaims that the river "changes nothing of its flowing" (p. 261), but then discovers alteration ("But here *is* a change") at Great Falls—the massive rock formation that gave the city's mills their power—where sea birds sit waiting for fish. What changes, Hartley insists, is not really the river, it is us: "Nothing is changed, nothing is different but ourselves/who note the change that brings us back/to nothing changed" (p. 261). A strange thing to claim of a river, since change is precisely what rivers usually symbolize. And a strange place, for many, to claim as beloved or sacred: "The secret sacred rite" of love for a place regarded by many as unlovable.

Poets have not written much about Lewiston: it is not a "poetic" city. It's a once-industrial, once-working class, once-horribly polluted city whose identity is strung out somewhere between all those "once" modifiers and an uncertain sense of just what it is becoming. Still, it can, as Hartley insisted, be a very pleasant place; and the Androscoggin has a particular beauty of its own, not just in its wild, upriver reaches, but here, at the point where it is most constrained by human construction. Even on a day when rapid melt leaves dirty snow and heaps of no-longer-hidden trash, I can find it beautiful.

Places, Names, Stories

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet"

"Every place name is a story", says the cultural critic Lucy Lippard (1997), "an outcropping of the shared tales that form the bedrock of community" (p. 46). But who does the naming, and how do we read the names? The places we know as Lewiston and Auburn arose and thrived because of water power afforded by the Androscoggin and the means humans devised to use it. The Wabanaki people, who were the original inhabitants of what is now the northeastern US and maritime Canada, had called the place Amitgonpontook, "a place where you smoke meat or fish" (Hall, 2015). The

² All poems cited can be found in Hartley (1987a, 1987b, 1987c).

name of the river itself is likely a contamination of earlier Wabanaki or Penobscot names; scholars' conjecture that the name comes either from an Eastern Abenaki term meaning "river of cliff rock shelters" (literally "thus-deep-dwelling-river") or a Penobscot word signifying "river of rock shelters". "The Anglicization of the Abenaki term is likely an analogical contamination with the colonial governor Edmund Andros" (Androscoggin River, n.d.). European settlers in this river valley replaced Wabanaki names with names of their own, memorializing places they'd left behind in England (Auburn, n.d.) or celebrating a European male (Hodgkin, n.d.). It's easy to see why environmental and religious thinkers have seen the act of naming as an assertion of power and dominion, the power "to name or rename oneself and one's place [...], an aspect of ownership" (Lippard, 1997, p. 47). But there may be other ways to see it: a friend recently suggested that the act of naming is a gesture of enormous responsibility: the story of Adam naming animals suggests to him something primal and parental. To name means to take on a responsibility that is absolute, the eternal and irrevocable responsibility of the one who loves for that which is loved. But have these names—either the city names themselves, or more recent ones—been attached with any kind of responsibility, of the kind my friend mentions? When European settlers moved inland from the Atlantic coast in search of timber in the late 18th century, the Androscoggin proved a powerful enticement to human desire and remaking. Great log runs were floated down river to be sawed into boards; among other things they were made into ships that connected New England with the Atlantic trade in both goods and people (Cotton Town, 2022). In the first half of the 19th century the Androscoggin, like New England's other rivers, powered the manufacture of textiles and, with the advent of kraft technology, the making of paper from the vast forests of Maine's Northwoods (Hillard, 2021). By the late 19th century thousands of Quebecois made their way south to the mills of Lewiston and other Maine river towns. The urban infrastructure of Lewiston was laid out by Boston industrialists, who brought in Irish laborers to build the canals that put river power to use in a series of massive brick mills. The tree-lined canals and city park at the center of an industrial grid were meant to evoke the compatibility of city and country, not with any environmental concerns in mind but to reassure the families of farm girls who came to Lewiston to work—the small hands of women and children being highly prized in the delicate but difficult work of overseeing thousands of spindles and bobbins. The cold-water tenements where many of the Quebecois newcomers lived were nicknamed "Little Canada". Built downstream from the city's textile mills (and from the paper mills farther upriver), the tenements looked out on a river that by the 1920's bore the brunt of industrialization. When I interviewed an elderly local resident about his experience of floods on the river, his comment was telling: "The real disaster wasn't the flood, it was the river". The word disaster is borne out by environmental historian Richard Judd's account (1990), not merely of the Androscoggin but of the state's two other major rivers:

By the 1920s the state's thirty-seven pulp and paper mills, eighty textile mills, and eleven tanneries were dumping thousands of tons of tanning liquors, sulfite, bleach, dye, and wool, cotton, and wood fiber into the state's rivers daily, placing enormous demands on the dissolved oxygen content of the waters. Hydroelectric

power dams created large bodies of stagnant water that compounded the pollution problem. Slabs of wood, bark, edgings, sawdust, and other errant materials drifting down from sawmills and log drives became trapped in extensive estuarine sections of the rivers, creating sawdust and sewage islands up to thirty feet thick and massive floating “plugs” trapped in the ebb and flow of the tides. (Judd, 1990, p. 53)

The runs of salmon, shad, alewives, and other fish that had led the Wabanaki to give the falls its name were long gone; fish were essentially asphyxiated in summer water when the percentage of dissolved oxygen fell to zero. Residents complained of summertime stench so powerful it induced nausea; one Lewiston jeweler found he could not keep his silver from tarnishing in the noxious air. By the 1970’s the Androscoggin was one of the ten most polluted rivers in the U.S., winning it a reference in *Newsweek* magazine’s dire cover story “The Ravaged Environment” (Auchincloss, 1970). It would be Senator Edmund Muskie—a son of the Androscoggin, born in the Milltown of Rumford and educated at Bates College in Lewiston—who spearheaded passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, landmark legislation that began the slow but steady process of cleaning up rivers and waterways.

Dams and the Whole

We of the place have often seen the river swell, rise to the bridge, almost carry it away, as it in times past already has done, between Lewiston and lovely Auburn.

—Edmund Marsden Hartley, “West Pitch at the Falls”

Like so many modern rivers, the Androscoggin is tightly controlled. Its flow is held back by over a dozen electricity-producing dams, many of them owned by Brookfield Energy, a Canadian company. The dams prevent upstream passage of the anadromous species that once teemed in these waters, including Atlantic salmon, now listed federally as an endangered species. The impoundment above Lewiston—Gulf Island Pond—is also implicated in water quality issues, because of how stagnant the water is behind it. But the dams also produce carbon-neutral power—a particularly acute problem in light of climate change—and they regulate flood waters. The power of Androscoggin floods to transform the landscape is breathtaking. In the spring of 1987, my first year in Maine, flood water reached high enough to close the Longley Bridge. There are pictures from a 1936 flood that show railcars loaded with boulders on the trestle above the falls. All those tons of rock to keep the bridge from being ripped loose. The flood of 2012 was not as destructive, but when I walked along the Riverwalk that year, I had a visceral sense of the power and fundamental wildness of this carefully controlled waterway. A reminder that in this landscape seemingly shaped by restraint and control, there is always the possibility of sudden destruction.

The force of the river at flood is extraordinary: great explosions of water over rock, thundering turbid sweeps of brown that crash and pour and throw up mist that’s higher than my head from where I stand watching on high ground. On the third day of rain in

early June I head out early with my camera, making my way slowly upstream, from where the Little Andy falls into the Androscoggin, swamping back yards and parking lots with swashing, stick-strewn water, up along the Riverwalk, waves lapping over the curb behind senior housing, over the pathway where the ducks congregate in summer. I go as far as I can beneath Longley Bridge, where the water main shoots a great funnel of rainwater into the underpass, the way blocked by a back eddy of river. From farther up on the bluff above the falls I watch a whole tree sail majestically downstream, like a Venetian gondola that's lost its oarsman. Standing at the very height of the falls, out on the small observation platform with its chain-link barrier between me and the thousands of pounds of racing water crashing against glacial boulders, I think this is why Lewiston is here. This great pounding cascade of water in motion, this seemingly endless traverse from mountains to sea, this sheer and tantalizing drop from narrows to great swirling lakes of foam. Not hard at all to imagine Benjamin Bates and his brethren standing here wild-eyed like Cortez, seeing in their minds' eye the turning wheels and flashing threads, the great machines of industry powered by what they thought God had given them, for free³.

The water that sometimes surges but more often trickles over the falls has made its way from the lakes of western Maine, from Mooselookmeguntic and Umbagog and then down the 150 or so miles to where we live. Hartley (1987a) imagined “fish that have played in black waters/among the mountains” making their way downstream to Lewiston; his Androscoggin pays no mind to Lewiston's mills and its “solemn canals”—“because it has business with the sea” (p. 264).

the birds—the sea birds—
someone says they wait for fish
to fall with the turmoil of the waters,
fish that have played in black waters
among the mountains. (p. 264)

But who are these fish? Not salmon, since the Androscoggin's salmon were gone by the early 19th century. Creating the possibility for them to thrive again depends on establishing fish passage ladders (usually ineffective) or completely removing dams. But efforts to remove dams are fiercely resisted by municipalities and industry. And the obstacles facing restoration of salmon fisheries aren't just dams; there is increasing evidence that warming ocean waters are impacting salmon as well...

Seeing the river “whole” is at least part of what Hartley tried to do with his bird's eye view, but seeing the river whole now means seeing all the different ways in which it is used, as well as the ways in which climate change is impacting just how much water is in the river. A 2020 state-commissioned report on climate change notes

³ “Seeing the potential for cotton fabric production of Lewiston's location at the Great Falls of the Androscoggin River, a syndicate of Boston investors including Thomas Hill, Lyman Nichols, George Ward, Alexander DeWitt, and, most importantly, Benjamin Bates, formed and chartered the Lewiston Water Power Company around 1850, which became Bates Manufacturing two years later. Astute and perspicacious enough to anticipate the Civil War, the syndicate stockpiled cotton during the 1850s, ensuring the company's wartime profit was enormous” (Bauman, 2012).

decreased snowpack and earlier “ice-out” dates, but says it is still unclear just how all of this will impact streamflow (Fernandez & Marvinney, 2020, p. 10).

In early fall my husband and I drive north to go hiking, and on our way home we stop at a place called Height of Land, just south of Mooselookmeguntic Lake. There is a pull-off on the highway where you can look out across deeply forested hillsides toward the lake and its two small islands. A guy in a pickup truck with a canoe in the bed has also pulled off to enjoy the view; when I ask him how the paddling was, he says he cannot believe how low the lake is. He points out toward Toothaker Island and says he could have walked most of the way there.

The late afternoon light is lovely, and we linger for a while; I read through the informational panels with images of Thoreau—his sojourns in the Maine wilderness—a map that shows where the Appalachian Trail crosses less than 500 yards away, and finally, how these lakes are the birthplace of the whole Androscoggin River watershed. I think about the trickle of water over our falls, the salmon that no longer make their way upstream, the men and women who work at the two remaining paper mills, the electricity generated by all the dams between here and the ocean.

Pastoral Lewiston

Fresh painted green bridge girders, lace of steel, light with sun and shadow...

—Robert Maurice Chute, “Crossing to the Other Side: New Auburn”⁴

If you want to walk along the Androscoggin River in central Lewiston and Auburn, start in New Auburn and set out across the Lown Bridge, also known as the Green Bridge, a traditional truss structure built in 1937 and recently repainted Kelly green (Bernard Lown Peace Bridge, n.d.), make your way through an empty parking lot outside the Continental Mill, and then head down Oxford Street by Place Ste. Marie—brick blocks built in the 1860’s as workers’ housing. Then turn left across the canal. This brings you to Simard-Payne Park, a reclaimed brownfield that now features a broad meadow with the remains of a railyard loading platform and clusters of trees along the river. Follow the walking path until you cross another sluice, water pouring from a spillway that once generated power, and then head up to Longley Bridge and Great Falls. To get to West Pitch Park above the falls you will have to cross the bridge and take a right—past a bank and hotel—until you come to the observation deck that Brookfield has constructed over the falls. Signs remind you how dangerous it is to step beyond the chain-link-fenced platform: when Brookfield releases water it can rise fast. Electricity transformers hum in the background. Look out over the waterscape of Lewiston and Auburn: Mill No. 5, designed by the great industrial architect Albert Kahn, lifts its signature saw-tooth roof above the traffic. Behind it is the vast hulk of Bates Mill, once famous for bedspreads. In the foreground, the mammoth boulders, the granite faces and puzzle of the falls, might help you understand why the Penobscot (Chute, 1997) knew the river as a place of “rock shelters”. Boston industrialists arrived and built their own shelters out of brick.

⁴ All poems cited can be found in Chute (1997).

Marsden Hartley's vision of Lewiston and the Androscoggin is deeply pastoral. He steps back from the banks of the river, away from what he remembers in the opening lines of "Lewiston is a Pleasant Place" (Hartley, 1987b) as "the harsh grinding of the mills" (p. 251) and heads instead for Franklin pasture (now site of Lewiston High School) and a walk with his father in the woods there ("[...] a cool clear stream, gathering water cresses/trilliums, dogtooth violets, and in/the fall—at times—mushrooms" [p. 251]). In "The Bend of the Androscoggin" (Hartley, 1987a) he imagines the down-stream town of Topsham as a "picture world/like a Yankee Breughel" with "French Canuck, salt Yankee skating," skating that will "smooth away/the progress of a testy day" (p. 264). At the beginning of "West Pitch at the Falls" (Hartley, 1987c), he registers a gnawing sense that he might be mis-remembering, that he is allowing "imaginings" of the past to displace what is in front of him. The hill he is looking at—which he had "imagined [...] thickly strewn with pines" (p. 232)—is not in fact particularly wooded. He wonders if spray from "spring freshets" tricked him into thinking there were more trees there. But rather than using that moment of awareness to bring attention to the present, he shifts back into more images of times past, nostalgic genre scenes that could be lifted from Currier and Ives: a boy skating on the frozen river; men "cutting cakes of ice eighteen inches thick"; tales of girls drowned (suicides?) in "the tossing foam" (p. 234). The mills that come into the beginning of "Lewiston is a Pleasant Place" (Hartley, 1987b) with their "harsh grinding" have receded by its end.

The mills and factories that were once gigantic
 in the vision of a child, monstrous, terrifying,
 prison-like, are now mere objects on the horizon,
 just as the garages and the filling stations have become.
 The Androscoggin flows by them all, giving them
 power through the solemn canals, minding none of
 them, going onward because it has business with the sea. (p. 255)

The poems give us a chance to follow this native son trying desperately to find in present-day Lewiston something of his childhood, of the wild-ish nature of Franklin Pasture. It is a picture that largely elides the industrial, just as it ignores the kinds of social conflict the city was renowned for: his "Canucks" and "Salt Yankees" skate together, but Lewiston had a long history of brawling among immigrant groups, and in the 1920's Lewiston—like all of Maine—saw a spike in Ku Klux Klan activity directed against Catholic Francos (Frenette, 1986, pp. 206–207). There was in fact a pastoral impulse in the way that Lewiston was laid out. By the time Benjamin Bates and his colleagues eyed the Androscoggin as a source of power, the great textile cities of Massachusetts had already been built. Architectural historians have detailed the ways in which Lewiston's planning was informed by cities like Lowell, Massachusetts, where "utopian social principles and industrialist pragmatics" informed factory layout and the provision of everything from boarding houses to lending libraries, aiming for a level of "refinement and amenity" but also wanting to reassure the families of those young farm

girls (Langenbach, 1981). This would not be Dickensian London⁵. The initial architecture was strictly utilitarian, but became more “expressive and fashionable” as the owners’ ambitions evolved. At least some of the plans for Lowell became lost in “a tangle of diagonally intersecting streets. [...] Only in the later cities did a single plan encompass the entire city, and only in the case of Lewiston, Maine, one of the last cities to follow Lowell’s model, does the original city plan show an overall, urban design unity” (Langenbach, 1981). An 1851 plan for Lewiston lays a symmetrical grid over the curve and bulge of the river’s traverse; parallel streets lead from the river—where the mills would be built to take advantage of the river’s power—toward a central city park. A photograph from 1870 “shows the intentional order of the canal, the mills, and the boarding houses—all landscaped with elm trees by the developing company” (Langenbach, 1981). The canals, the elms, the park; the gracious Italianate cupolas of the mills themselves (now decapitated by an owner who got tired of repairing the roof): these were dreams that imagined the possibility of holding onto “nature” even as you exploited it.

At least some of Lewiston’s riverfront is now remarkably pastoral. Simard-Payne Park was until the late 1990’s an industrial brownfield, cleared in 2000 by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to be safe for use as parkland (EPA, 2002). Its broad open meadow becomes the staging area for a late-summer balloon festival, a beer fest (since part of the old Bates Mill is now a brewery) and occasional Somali soccer games (Bass, 2018). It is the place I once volunteered with people teaching Somali and other inner-city kids to fish. A local land trust and folks from the National Park Service brought rods and reels, and the boys and girls—the latter in colorful hijabs and sneakers—were taught how to cast (without hooks) in the big open meadow, before they got a chance to head down to the water. There is a picture from the afternoon of me and a young girl; I am wearing a pink shirt and have my arm around her shoulder; she is in a purple headscarf and shirt over a pink and purple skirt. We are both smiling broadly. We stand in the shelter of an oak tree, with the river just visible behind us. It is a pastoral place, humane, and healthy, and hopeful, for however short a time. It is as though the Boston industrialists’ and Lowell city planners’ dreams have been realized, in ways wilder and stranger than their wildest dreams.

The names attached to these places, however, do not yet reflect that picture—whether it is New Americans playing soccer or their children learning to fish. The men for whom Simard-Payne is now named were police officers who died in the line of duty. Bernard Lown, whose name now graces the Green Bridge, came to Lewiston from his native Lithuania when he was 14. He became a cardiologist (and developed the defibrillator) and in 1980 founded International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War together with the Soviet physician Dr. Evgenii Chazov. Bonney Park—across the river from Simard-Payne—is also named for a police officer; and Longley Bridge, which crosses the river near the falls and joins the two cities’ downtowns, is named for James Longley, born in Lewiston and elected governor of Maine in the 1970’s. The other names you see as you walk the river are commercial (Gladu Roofing; Yvonne’s Carwash; Baxter Brewing) or veterans’ names inscribed on dark-grey panels

⁵ Dickens visited Lowell as part of his 1842 tour of the U.S., and praised both the factory system and the girls employed there. See Archibald & Brattin (2015), chapters 1 and 2.

at Memorial Park, close to the falls. Graffiti beneath the Monty Hydro generating station shouts HOPE and LOVE to anyone looking.

The more expansively we think about names, the more inclusive, and more interesting, the story becomes. It is not just poets who are “namers” and “sayers”, as Emerson puts it, even if their naming has traditionally had particular resonance and power. Over the past two decades groups within downtown Lewiston have worked hard to elevate the voices of those actually living within reach of the river, in those poorest-in-Maine census tracts.

Redevelopment in downtown Lewiston began, however, with erasure and conflict. In 2004 Lewiston officials announced the Heritage Initiative, which would have created a highway corridor through residential neighborhoods, razing the homes of 850 residents. Then-mayor Lionel Guay promoted the project as celebrating “wonderful heritage”, suggesting a nostalgic vision of the city’s working-class Francos, a demographic that had already begun to shift significantly (Belluck, 2002; Wright, 2009). The project immediately elicited pushback from downtown residents and their supporters, who repudiated the idea that there was no “real” community there. The City withdrew The Heritage Initiative under protest, and a group which came to call itself the Visible Community proceeded to do some city planning of their own. In 2008 they submitted *The People’s Downtown Master Plan* (Visible community, 2008), which they described as “not just a plan for the future [...] but a process of empowerment” (p. 4), a process that would nurture and inspire leaders from within the downtown. The authors of the Plan were clear that those outside their neighborhood “often have a very different view [of it] than residents do” (p. 5). To the negative myths that had taken hold they responded: “We see downtown as home—a place that holds our hopes and dreams for a better future and a better quality of life” (p. 5). The final report carefully summarized a deliberate and inclusive process, how issues had been identified, and what the top four goals were (better transportation, improved housing, a Community Center and increased employment opportunities).

But the legacy of the Visible Community was not just a planning document. The neighborhood found a historian/poet in Craig Saddlemire, a community activist turned film maker whose documentaries about downtown Lewiston both chronicle the work of the Visible Community and hand cameras to inner-city kids to tell their own stories (Saddlemire, 2009, 2011). Organizing in the wake of the failed Heritage Initiative led to the strengthening of various alliances among downtown residents and others from both Lewiston and Auburn. In 2019 a group of organizations from downtown Lewiston submitted a bid for \$30 million in federal funding (through the Choice Neighborhoods Program of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development) that would allow for dramatically increased spending on affordable housing. The grant was awarded to the city in 2021, the first ever to be given to a city as small as Lewiston (Lewiston wins \$30 million, 2021). The 250-page plan was “developed over a year and a half, with input from 400 residents speaking eight different languages,” evidence of a community-focused process and a commitment to hearing different voices, in different languages⁶ (Ferguson & Keefe, 2021).

⁶ One current member of the Healthy Neighborhoods board remembers French, Somali, Arabic, Lingala, and Portuguese being among those languages for which interpretation was provided.

The Dirty Lew: Lewiston and the Abject

...Jesus, can you save us
 from despair? The river's banks are both a spew
 of trash. The factory where your banner's nailed
 seems boarded, blind, abandoned. The Good Hope Mission
 offers a bed and bread to frustrate hope's mortician.
 Our courage at the river's crossing now is hailed:
 Jesus Greatly to be Praise—advertisement and vision
 cries from the bridge's end as from a prison.

—Robert Maurice Chute, “Crossing to the Other Side: New Auburn”

It's not just former Mayor Guay who sees present-day Lewiston in negative terms. Bob Chute's poem from his 1997 collection describes a bleak urban landscape, with trashed riverbanks and a soup kitchen offering “hope” that conjures up a prison. Rivers go somewhere, but Chute's is a bridge to nowhere. Lewiston's reputation throughout Maine is as a hard-luck, grimy place, a place that stands in sharp contrast to the rugged, wild Maine of tourist brochures. This vision of Lewiston doesn't just come from other parts of Maine. Many locals—including residents of the very Tree Streets that the Visible Community sought to lift up—see downtown Lewiston in terms that are *abject*. My dictionary defines *abject* as “completely without pride or dignity; self-abasing”. As a theoretical term used in visual studies, it refers to “artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions” (Abject Art, n.d.). Lewiston's vernacular nickname is “The Dirty Lew,” a term that plays on the homonym *lew/loo* (British informal term for toilet), and which the Urban Dictionary suggests refers to “someone who is a complete douchebag” (foreal, 2005). Both *loo* and *Lew* as *douchebag* refer to bodily functions, the evacuation of bodily waste or the cleaning of the (female) body cavities. Rivers for most of history have, of course, been places where human waste—both bodily waste and the leavings of everyday life—were disposed of. But in these descriptions, it's as if the whole community has become refuse, an unsightly, stinking body that needs to be flushed away as quickly as possible.

While Craig Saddle mire has celebrated the dignity and diversity of downtown community, another “historian/poet” of Lewiston, the local journalist Mark LaFlamme, styles himself a connoisseur of precisely this “Dirty Lew”, flamboyantly displaying his street cred in columns that regularly emphasize the grimy street life of the city (LaFlamme, 2014). Prostitution, drug deals, shady police, violence, and rumors of violence. And while it is tempting to see LaFlamme's writing as simply a last-ditch appeal by the local newspaper for a particular kind of disgruntled reader, we might also read him as someone who does not want to let go of the city's working-class identity, its rough-and-tumble past and present. In his own way, it is possible that LaFlamme as much as the Visible Community does not want to see Lewiston gentrified.

The Mighty Androscoggin Can Be So Beautiful

Workers sweating as wheels creak and grind
 might not agree, but I, overpowered,
 as Emerson was by Rhodora's flower,
 evils of both natures set aside, find
 this beauty is its own excuse, and mine.

—Robert Maurice Chute, “The Great Bowdoin Mill”

In late January a woman named Jennifer Warriner posts a photograph of Lewiston and the river on a local social media site. Taken from Auburn, the image shows an intense orange-and-yellow sunset that is reflected in glassy open water between snowy banks and near-shore ice. There are silhouettes of bare trees in the foreground, and in the distance the skyline of Lewiston: churches, city hall, the stack at Bates Mill with a whisp of smoke blowing north. Her caption assumes her readers know exactly where this is, so instead of giving us a place name, she simply states “the Mighty Androscoggin River can be so beautiful”.

Bob Chute's (1997) poem about the Bowdoin Mill (downstream from Lewiston, in Topsham) quotes the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poem “The Rhodora” proclaims that “beauty is its own excuse for being”—and that both poet and flower find their origins in “the self-same power” (Emerson, 1899). Chute's poem proclaims that the brick mill above the river also has a beauty that “is its own excuse, and mine” (Chute, 1997). The city that Warriner has captured in her photograph (which attracted lots of approval on line, and lead others to share their photographs of the river) is the same one that is known as “the Dirty Lew”. But here it is not a place of grime and abjection, it is beautiful. It is not clear when the term “the Mighty Androscoggin” was first used, although it clearly has its origin in the industrial power of the river. It is a kind of might we rarely see any more, given dams and diminished water levels, but the moniker has stuck. Warriner's Mighty Androscoggin is in any case a river in deep repose, an image that makes one think of Wordsworth's Thames, his “holy time [...] quiet with adoration” (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 135).

Maine is known nationwide—even internationally—as a place of extraordinary natural beauty. A sparsely-populated state in the northeastern-most corner of the USA, Maine's reputation is based on imagery of wilderness that has been cultivated by an array of major artists and writers, including Hartley, but also the writers Thoreau and Longfellow, and artists like Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. The iconography of their work focuses on Maine's Atlantic coast, with its rocky promontories, lighthouses, and dramatic seascape—and on its thickly-forested inlands, a region that Thoreau first celebrated (for Boston readers) in his 1864 *The Maine Woods*⁷. Now successfully commodified, these artistic images help to fuel a multi-billion-dollar tourist industry that is of enormous importance to the state's economy. The image of Maine as a place offering retreat from the complexities of the modern world goes back at least into the late 19th century, spurred

⁷ Famous Maine poets and writers include Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Longfellow, Sarah Orne Jewett, Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. Marsden Hartley's 1939 “Mount Katahdin Autumn, No. 2” is a particularly well-known image of the Maine wilds. He never painted Lewiston.

in part by the development of modern tourism and by cultural anxieties spurred by the “end” of the American frontier and increasing numbers of working-class immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The cultural historian John Lewis (1993) documents how the state became a vacationland for tourists looking to escape to the state’s camps and grand hotels. The realities of rural poverty were glossed over or transformed into virtues; Mainers themselves were cast as figures of rectitude and stoicism, fitting inhabitants for a place characterized by long winters and challenging conditions. As Lewis puts it,

what is reflected in this myth of Maine and her people is not nature, as the myth suggests, nor the real past to which it supposedly refers. Rather, what is reflected is a constructed image that both validates and consoles those who believe in it. Myths, as Roland Barthes observed, deprive the objects of which they speak of their history. “All that is left to do is enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it came from”. (p. 151)

But if rural poverty was transformed in this vision into picturesque, quaint lobster shacks and backroads, the mills of a place like Lewiston were harder to convert. In the mythos of Maine as idyll of wild nature and virtue, there was no place for somewhere like Lewiston. To echo Barthes, Lewiston was a place that “spoke” its history in brick and foam, grit and stench. The city told a story of factory and labor, reminding anyone who looked that the state’s waters and woods were being intensively used for the stuff of everyday life—from paper and bedspreads to shoes. The constructed Maine, a place that supposedly allowed travel *backwards* into a simpler, more natural life, forswore precisely the kinds of complexity a place like Lewiston embodied—pollution and tenements and the tradeoffs between industry, livelihood and public health.

Lewiston still frustrates that myth of Maine, so much so that the city can provoke in visitors a perverse resentment. In the late 1980’s friends of my colleague arrived for a summer visit, and could barely contain their anger that Lewiston wasn’t “Maine”. No rocky coast, no picturesque lighthouses, no virtuous flannel-clad lumberjacks. But it is at least arguable that a place like Lewiston is in fact vastly *more* interesting than the mythic, nostalgic Maine—precisely for the ways in which it is changing.

Hybrid Place, for Chorus and Solo Voice

Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories... It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.

—Lucy R. Lippard, “The Lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society”

Lucy Lippard (1997) insists that all places are hybrid, and that “each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all ‘local places’ consist of. By entering that hybrid, we change it” (p. 6). Attuned

to what she sees as enormous contemporary hunger for senses of place and belonging, she urges us to see place as “lived-in”, informed by intimacy and the sensory, not just viewed at a distance through painterly conventions of landscape (p. 6). Among other things it is a plea to hear voices, to listen to stories, to see culture and history braided together in vernacular landscapes.

Any place is an amalgam—a mosaic—a roughshod chorus of voices, some human, some more-than-human, held together within grids shaped by natural features and human making. An infrastructure of brick and granite, streets and mills, but also of river, stone, gully, hillside. Many voices make up the chorus-in-place that is Lewiston (and Auburn). And that great array of voices, along with the silences of past and present, is still speaking and being heard.

Nancy Lecompte, who has labored for years to assemble stories of the Wabanki in western Maine, once responded to a question I sent her about whether there were native middens in Auburn: “There is no question the banks of the Androscoggin above and below the Great Falls and on both sides is the site of an ancient Abenaki Community. It has likely been an important location for thousands of years[...] But the area is just too industrialized in modern times and everything has already been too disturbed to be of value or interest. I participated in a dig on the Lewiston side many years ago. It seems like we dug to China in many locations and only found industrial era fill”.

Underneath the voices of all who have named the Androscoggin lies the silence of those who were here first, who were here for so long. But we still keep digging, even in “industrial fill,” and many people keep speaking and working to allow new (and old) voices to speak—whether those are poets, or people’s plan participants, or film makers, or kids with cameras. The best way to know a place, Lucy Lippard argues, is *from the inside*.

To Susann Pelletier (1989), a contemporary Lewiston poet, Lewiston is a place of makers: it is not a landscape to be contemplated, but a place that people have come to and made home. She remembers the Lewiston of her childhood as a place that “gave little comfort/It shook me with the clatter of looms/And night machines/Blinded me with that immigrant dream/burning...” (p. 5). What Pelletier sees is not a conventionally beautiful city, but a city filled with workers who have traded a world of beauty (rural Quebec, France) for “the weight of a dream” (p. 5), men and women streaming into factories to mass produce bedspreads. To Pelletier, francophone Lewistonians (“LaMontagne, DeBlois, Thibault”) were from a “people who built cathedrals” (p. 5), heirs of those who had woven great tapestries. Her poem concludes with an encomium to her father:

[...] my father is a maker of whole things
 (Houses, fences and gates,
 Tables and chairs
 Cupboards and counters)
 And when his saw sang through the board
 And his hammer drove the nail

The din of those mill machines was stilled
 I heard the sweetest strains of labor
 I saw how a world is crafted
 By two steadfast hands. (p. 6)

This encomium celebrates the way in which the city was a place of *making*—often mass-produced goods that offered immigrants a modest way of life, but little chance for larger shaping of the world. Still the city is a place that holds the possibility of creativity—Pelletier’s vision of “how a world is crafted” (p. 7), Chute’s hybrid beauty—mill and river—that “is its own excuse.” People continue to come to this city of immigrants not for its conventional beauty, but because it is a place they can make a life. They speak languages that no one ever imagined speaking here. Hartley said of the Canadians that they had given Lewiston “new/life, new fervors, new charms, new vivacities” (Hartley, 1987b, p. 251). The same could be said of Somali Bantu and Congolese, who re-shape the hybrid place that is Lewiston. The place itself responds, re-made by new vision and voices. For all these newcomers, too, perhaps Lewiston will be “part of the secret sacred rite/of love of place” (p.251).

References

- Abject Art*. (n.d.). Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abject-art>
- Androscoggin river. (2022, April 9). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Androscoggin_River&oldid=1081817187
- Archibald, D., & Brattin, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Dickens and Massachusetts: The lasting legacy of the Commonwealth visits*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Auburn*. (n.d.). RootsWeb. <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~meandros/auburn.htm>
- Auchincloss, K. (1970, January 26). The ravaged environment. *Newsweek*.
- Bass, A. (2018). *One goal: A coach, a team and the game that brought a divided town together*. Hachette.
- Bauman, J.F. (2012). Lewiston textile mills and waterpower system historic district. *SAH Archipedia*. <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/ME-01-001-0029>
- Belluck, P. (2002, October 15). Mixed welcome as Somalis settle in a Maine City. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/15/us/mixed-welcome-as-somalis-settle-in-a-maine-city.html>
- Bernard Lown Peace Bridge*. (n.d.). HistoricBridges.org. <https://historicbridges.org/bridges/browser/?bridgebrowser=maine/south/>
- Chute, R. (1997). *Androscoggin too. The Pejepscot poems*. Nightshade Press.
- Cotton town: Maine’s economic connections to slavery*. (2022). Maine Maritime Museum. <https://www.mainemaritimemuseum.org/exhibition/as-yet-untitled-in-collaboration-with-bowdoin-college/>

Emerson, R. W. (1844). *Essays: Second* (Series. American Transcendentalist Web). <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/poet.html>

Emerson, R. W. (1899). Early poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thomas Y. Crowell & Co. <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/poems/the-rhodora/>

EPA—United States Environment Protection Agency. (2002, August 14). *Success in EPA conducted targeted brownfields assessments, Lewiston, ME*. https://archive.epa.gov/region1/brownfields/web/html/lewiston_rr_park.html

Ferguson, C., & Keefe, J. (2019, September 26). There's a push to transform Maine's poorest downtown. Here's what you need to know. *Bangor Daily News*. <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2019/09/26/news/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-push-to-transform-maines-poorest-downtown/>

Ferguson, C., & Keefe, J. (2021, May 20). Lewiston wins competitive \$30 million federal grant to transform housing. *Bangor Daily News*. <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2021/05/20/news/central-maine/lewiston-wins-competitive-30-million-federal-grant-to-transform-housing/>

Fernandez, R., & Marvinney, R. (Eds.). (2020). *Maine*. Scientific and Technical Subcommittee (STS) of the Maine Climate Council (MCC). https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/GOPIF_STS_REPORT_092320.pdf

foreal. (2005, January 17). The Lew. In *The Urban Dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=The%20Lew>

Frenette, Y. (1986). Understanding the French Canadians of Lewiston, 1960–1900: An alternate framework. *Maine History*, 25, 198–226. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol25/iss4/2>

Gay, R., & Wehrenberg, R. (2014). *River*. Monster House Press.

Hartley, M. (1987a). Androscoggin. In G. R. Scott (Ed.), *The Collected poems of Marsden Hartley, 1904–1943* (pp. 261–268). Black Sparrow Press.

Hartley, M. (1987b). Lewiston is a pleasant place. In G. R. Scott (Ed.), *The Collected poems of Marsden Hartley, 1904–1943* (pp. 254–261). Black Sparrow Press.

Hartley, M. (1987c). West Pitch at the falls. In G. R. Scott (Ed.), *The Collected poems of Marsden Hartley, 1904–1943* (pp. 232–238). Black Sparrow Press.

Hillard, M. (2021). *Shredding paper: The rise and fall of Maine's mighty paper industry*. Cornell University Press.

Hodgkin, D. I. (n.d.). *A brief history of Lewiston*. Lewiston, ME—Official Website. <https://www.lewistonmaine.gov/421/History-of-Lewiston>

Judd, R. W. (1990). The coming of the Clean Waters Acts in Maine, 1941–1961. *Environmental History Review*, 14(3), 50–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3984726>

LaFlamme, D. (2014, July 14). Dirty Lew. *Lewiston Sun Journal*. <https://www.sunjournal.com/2010/07/14/dirty-lew/>

Langenbach, R. (1981). From building to architecture. The emergence of Victorian Lowell. *Harvard Architecture Review*, 2, 90–105. [https://www.conservationtech.com/RL%27s%20resume%20pub%27s/RL-publications/Milltowns/1981-LOWELL\(Harv-Arch-Rev\).htm](https://www.conservationtech.com/RL%27s%20resume%20pub%27s/RL-publications/Milltowns/1981-LOWELL(Harv-Arch-Rev).htm)

Lecompte, N. (2003). *Alnôbak: A story of indigenous people in Androscoggin County*. Androscoggin Historical Society.

Lewis, J. (1993). The Maine that never was: The construction of popular myth in regional culture. *The Journal of American Culture*, 16(2), 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1993.00091.x>

Lewiston wins \$30 million Choice Neighborhoods Grant. (2021, May 25). *Healthy Neighborhoods*. <https://www.growingourtreetreets.com/blog-posts/2021/5/25/lewiston-wins-30-million-choice-neighborhoods-grant>

Lippard, L. (1997) *The lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society*. New Press.

Pelletier, S. (1989). *Immigrant Dream and other poems*. Soleil Press.

Richards, M. (2017). *Not a Catholic nation: The Ku Klux Klan confronts New England in the 1920s*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Saddlemire, C. (2009). *Neighbor by neighbor: Mobilizing an invisible community in Lewiston, ME* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/39576889>

Saddlemire, C. (2011). *Kids of the world* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/34272306>

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Lewiston city, Maine. Quick facts*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/lewistoncitymaine>

Visible community. (2008). *The people's downtown master plan*. <http://www.lewistonmaine.gov/DocumentCenter/View/802/2008---The-Peoples-Downtown-Master-Plan---The-Vis?bidId=>

Wabanaki place names of Western Maine. (n.d.). Androscoggin River Portal. <http://androscoggin.bates.edu/home/culture-history/wabanki-place-names-of-western-maine--introduction>

Wordsworth, W. (1994). *Selected poetry*. Oxford University Press.

Wright, V. (2009, December 23). Like a good neighbor. *Bates Magazine*. <https://www.bates.edu/news/2009/12/23/16173/>