



Ordinary Affects: Folk Art, Maud Lewis, and the Social Aesthetics of the Everyday

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The folk art category in Nova Scotia has long participated in a larger search for optimism that emerged there at the end of the twentieth century, in the midst of a shifting socio-economic landscape that radically shaped the parameters within which folk art would be understood. Folk art was an optimistic construction in the sense that it provided public history makers of influence in and around Nova Scotia with a cultural object upon which they might affix their desire for an organized daily life under the disorganized and despondent realities of late capitalism.¹ Indeed, Nova Scotia was a place that, beginning in the 1950s, saw overwhelming social reorganization by centralized bureaucracies aimed at advancing an urban, modernizing ideal over traditional ways of rural living.² This “decade of development” in Atlantic Canada saw workers moving away from an industrial-labour base in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining and towards newly expanding trade and service sectors.³ Yet by the 1960s, despite the fact that Atlantic Canadian politicians on the whole maintained faith in local material progress and confidently asserted that economic disparity between the region and the rest of Canada would narrow, many working Nova Scotians still struggled to earn a living wage.⁴ In 1969, unemployment in the province was nearly double what it was in the rest of the country, and personal incomes were almost half of what they were in Ontario.⁵ The resulting increase in Atlantic Canadian out-migration prompted one leading economist of the day to suggest in 1966 that “a cheap one-way fare to Montreal would solve the region’s economic problems.”⁶ Yet optimism remained at the fore of provincial politics because of such new federal actions on regional development as the Department of Regional Economic Expansion in 1969, which promised to consolidate the distribution of federal resources across Atlantic Canada.⁷ Amidst these changing socio-economic conditions, in which rural Nova Scotians were both materially marginalized by and resistant to the regional development

Detail, still of Maud Lewis painting, surrounded by her decorated household items, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [*sic*] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

programs that sought to modernize them, folk art provided a means to optimistically reimagine the everyday realities of working people, both in cultural contexts and beyond them.⁸ And there was one self-taught artist in particular whose painted landscapes of rural Nova Scotia helped to visualize late capitalism's overwhelming disorganization of the ordinary: Maud Lewis (1903–1970) of Marshalltown, Digby County.

Since her death, conventional accounts of Maud Lewis have positioned her as an isolated, poor, disabled woman who went largely without recognition in her own lifetime.⁹ Prominent examples here include the 1997 Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) retrospective of her paintings and the 1998 National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentary of the same title, “The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis.” Both of these public history projects presented Lewis as an artist who “led a confined life, rarely going far from her own home.”¹⁰ Like other artists saddled with the “folk” label, such positioning signals that Lewis was ignorant of conventional art-world mechanisms in her lifetime, here specifically as a result of her rural marginalization in Marshalltown. In fact, the closed community in which folk art is typically thought to be created did not truly exist for Lewis, and by the time of her death in 1970, the local *Digby Courier* had already recognized Lewis as an “internationally known primitive style artist.”¹¹ A 1964 transcript of a *Digby Courier* editorial makes a similar point, noting that Lewis’s paintings “have become famous throughout Canada,” with orders arriving to the Lewis home by mail “from Newfoundland, British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba and if we remember correctly the U.S.A. The local demand, too, is heavy, said Mrs. Lewis, as the editor placed an order for two.”¹²

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Lewis’s reputation grew far beyond her local community: her everyday life and creative processes were explored in radio and television broadcasts from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), documentaries from the NFB, and popular press articles. In the words of one writer, recognition of Lewis’s work grew quickly because such public attention focused on her story as “a rural, isolated, poverty stricken, handicapped, female folk artist – the ultimate marginalized outsider.”¹³ Lewis seemed to triumph over such obstacles as disability, gendered economic marginalization, and rurality through the joyful optimism of her small painted panel board landscapes, which infused everyday scenes of Digby County life with bright colours painted in a raw, gestural way (Fig. 1). Moreover, because Lewis’s paintings portrayed such rural activities as oxen-pulling, fishing, and logging, they came to serve as a novel example of the resilience of traditional living for those public history makers seeking to grapple with the province’s increased modernization during the 1960s and 1970s. This theme has since become the central component of narrations of



1 | Maud Lewis, *Moored Cape Islander*, ca. 1960, oil on board, 23.2 × 30.5 cm, on loan to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia from Tony and Benita Cormier, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. (Photo: Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia)

her story – one that, for many late-twentieth-century antimodernists, spoke to her folkish perseverance in a rapidly changing world. As former AGNS director Bernard Riordon put it in 2007, her art-making in the face of a shifting cultural and economic milieu came to represent a “human condition of triumph” that many people were in search of during her lifetime.¹⁴ Indeed, the AGNS and other public history makers like it have long advanced a narrative that continues to make Lewis’s story compelling for audiences up to the present: her apparent ability to rise above the everyday tragedy of her life through an indefatigable optimism.

An interpretative framework for that optimism might be described here by using the term “ordinary affect.” As anthropologist Kathleen Stewart explains, ordinary affects “are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life.”¹⁵ This article employs

Stewart's concept of the ordinary affect to argue that Lewis's life story provided public history makers of influence an optimistic opportunity to fuse ideas about ordinariness with late-capitalist antimodernist fantasy. It examines this process using what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant calls "a materialist context for affect theory."¹⁶ Affect, in short, is understood here as an empathic register on the body, which has the potential to produce history, politics, subjectivity, and consciousness.¹⁷ When it comes to positioning such affective structures historically, Berlant argues for a viewpoint that reads people's respective historical presents in terms of the affects that have subsequently been organized into "an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back."¹⁸ What this means in Lewis's case is that empathic visions of her biography have helped public history makers to create a novel account of one woman's ability to triumph over her material reality through the cultural production of folk painting. Rather than offering a systematic investigation of the larger historical factors that produced either this socio-economic circumstance, or the folk construct, in the first place, ordinary affects produced and circulated by public history makers have emphasized Lewis's biography. By contrast, drawing on materialist affect theory allows for an examination of the ways in which the ordinary nature of Lewis's life was not simply a means for public history makers of the 1960s and 70s to nostalgically remember an antimodernist golden age that Lewis was thought to represent in their historical present. Instead, it becomes possible to analyze how the ordinary affects of tragedy and optimism provided a way to address the particular postwar crises of late capitalism through the advancement of the folk art category; for it was folk art, above all, that enabled public history makers to find examples of extraordinary people in ordinary settings who could rise above the economic subjugation that many Nova Scotians were then experiencing.¹⁹

Maud Lewis was born Maud Dowley, the only daughter of John Nelson Dowley and Agnes Mary Germaine, in South Ohio, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, on 7 March 1903. She had a chronic physical condition that has been identified as everything from the aftereffects of polio²⁰ to arthritis²¹ to "multiple birth defects,"²² which impacted her mobility and dexterity. Perceptions about Lewis's disability have also been fundamental to building her public biography, with credit often attributed to her mother, Agnes, for encouraging Maud to paint Christmas cards despite what might have been considered her daughter's physical limitations.²³ In 1937, after the deaths of both of her parents and her sister, Lewis was apparently unable to support herself alone and moved to Digby to live with her maternal aunt, Ida Germaine. On 16 January 1938, she married Everett Lewis (1893–1979) of Marshalltown and moved into his small, one-room home, where she would



2 | Lewis home, Marshalltown, Digby County, 1965. (Photo: © Bob Brooks)

live until her death in 1970. It was the residence she shared with Everett that ultimately helped to solidify Maud Lewis's reputation as what the AGNS has called "Canada's best loved folk artist," for it was there that she began painting her now-famous wooden panel landscapes to sell to local people and tourist passersby (Fig. 2).²⁴ The Lewises' Marshalltown home was located on a busy highway that facilitated visitor access. A place without modern conveniences such as electricity or indoor plumbing, it provided an architectural framing for an ordinary life – one that represented the ability to eke out a traditional existence and that was juxtaposed with the daily activities of a modernizing Nova Scotian populace.

The narrative of the Lewises living a precarious life in rural surrounds and isolated from the evolving modern atmosphere around them had possibilities for optimism that public history makers were quick to capitalize upon. The first public history event that propelled Lewis's story into public

life beyond Marshalltown was a 1964 radio interview with Lewis for the CBC program *Trans-Canada Matinee*. Alida K. (Cora) Greenaway, a freelance journalist and heritage activist who worked with the CBC in Nova Scotia, produced the piece, which generated widespread interest in Maud Lewis's story.²⁵ As a result of the radio interview, the Toronto-based *Star Weekly* magazine published an illustrated article about Lewis in July 1965. The article featured a series of photographs of Maud and Everett Lewis taken by Bob Brooks,²⁶ along with a text by writer Murray Barnard, who described the Lewises' daily life "in a house so small that it might have been built for Tom Thumb. Passersby on highway no. 2 four miles west of Digby would dismiss it as a tool shed except for one thing: its white shingle walls and doors are decorated with flowers, birds and butterflies, painted in brilliant colours by Maud Lewis."²⁷ On the whole, early public history encounters with Lewis's story offered a glimpse into the perceived ordinariness of her everyday existence and spatiality, one determined by her remaining "within the 60 miles of small farms, fishing villages and lumber camps separating the towns of Digby and Yarmouth on the southern tip of Nova Scotia" throughout her life.²⁸ Lewis's life story spoke firmly to the regional and geographic space of "folk" underdevelopment, one demarcated by the kind of livelihood that processes of urban modernization were thought to be quickly displacing throughout the province.

The Lewis case therefore helps to shed light on the dominant temporal and spatial cultural associations assigned to country living that had begun decades earlier in Nova Scotia – namely, the idea of rural places as being slower in pace, as representing a time gone by, and as remaining tied to the everyday life of past eras alongside the progressive advancement of urbanization. In examining these temporal and spatial distinctions, social and cultural historians have long noted an important ideology that shapes the ways in which rural workers have been conventionally understood throughout Canada's Maritime Provinces, particularly in terms of their association with settlement of lands through pastoral agriculture. As Daniel Samson argues, for example:

If merchants were seen as world-striding entrepreneurs, settlers, on the other hand, were imagined as clearers of the land and founders of autonomous communities. Their only connection to the merchants' world was their unwillingness to devote themselves wholly to the land and their all-too-willing seduction by the easy money available in cutting timber rather than hay and harvesting fish rather than potatoes. This, together with an alleged subsistence orientation and technological backwardness of the Maritime farmer,

created a rural society characterized by its “cultural isolation” and “primitive” condition.²⁹

The highly gendered cultural characterization of the rural settler in the Maritimes as, on the one hand, an industrious “jack-of-all-trades” and, on the other, a farmer who “neglected his farm and went off to square timber” has indeed had important implications for public history narration up to the present.³⁰ Much like the proverbial farmer who participated in Nova Scotia’s economy through subsistence labour rather than through eking out a profit, Maud Lewis came to epitomize a way of life that many public history makers understood as disappearing.

Specifically, public history ventures positioned Lewis’s painting as a means towards improving her meagre lot in life, a cultural practice that could merge the simplicity of her aesthetic with ideas about her naïve understanding of capitalist exchange. Barnard, for example, explained that the Lewises’ “income is now less than \$1,500 a year. Nevertheless both are happy. ‘I don’t need anything much more than I’ve got,’ says Maude [*sic*], ‘except maybe another room for painting in.’”³¹ He also pointed to the precariousness of the Lewises’ financial situation, noting that Lewis charged only \$3 to \$4.50 per painting, since, “perhaps mistakenly, she thinks higher prices will drive her present friendly buyers away.”³² Her only interruption in days spent painting small panel landscapes to sell to passing tourists, Barnard revealed, were rides in a “vintage Model T,” in which Everett took Maud “peddling fish from village to village three days a week.”³³ Barnard’s article established Maud Lewis as “Canada’s Grandma Moses,” and it did so by further marvelling at the fact that such an artist could exist with “the distractions of modern society,” which make it “almost impossible to be a primitive painter.”³⁴ Lewis was therefore framed as a cultural producer who could not be expected to understand the material value of her work, since she was thought to produce it almost exclusively for the pure joy of creative expression.

Another part of the process of establishing Lewis as an artist on the fringe of Nova Scotia’s modernizing expansion was to rely on the art-world expertise of those who could authenticate her positioning as a folk artist.³⁵ In Barnard’s case, he solicited commentary on the cultural significance of Lewis’s painting from commercial gallery owners Bill Ferguson and Claire Stenning of Ten Mile House in Bedford, and from the Halifax-based professional artist John Cook (1918–1984). Describing Lewis as working in a “primitive style [in which] there are no shadows,” Ferguson evoked her folk status by isolating the crudeness of Lewis’s aesthetic. Likewise, Cook observed that it was “a trick of her environment” that made her “a natural primitive.”³⁶ Nor did Barnard miss the opportunity to reinforce Lewis’s economic naiveté and

cement her passivity by revealing that Stenning and Ferguson were then in the process of negotiating “high quality reproductions of Maude [sic] Lewis’s paintings” in order to “pay her royalties. Bill hopes it will be a solution to the tricky problem of giving the couple a little more security.”³⁷

Together, the accounts of Greenaway and Barnard establish a few primary tropes that would help to narrate Lewis’s story over the next few decades, among them her ability to overcome her material circumstances by painting simple, joyful landscapes that spoke to the optimism she felt about her ordinary life. They also generally separate her work from the material circumstances of its production, which included the expansion of industry, transportation, and technology across Nova Scotia. Thus when Cora Greenaway produced her second CBC piece about Lewis in 1965 – this time for the television series *Telescope* – she relied on Lewis’s contemporary paintings to provide a window into Nova Scotia’s remaining rural areas. The resulting thirty-minute broadcast, entitled “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” featured a view of Lewis’s daily life similar to the one presented in Barnard’s text, affording contextual information about Lewis’s paintings that drew on many of the same sources. Once again, Stenning, Ferguson, and Cook were called upon to authenticate Lewis as a folk artist who was allochronically distanced³⁸ from both the training of the professional art world and from urban Nova Scotia’s modernizing frontier. These three experts, in other words, situated Lewis’s existence as separated chronologically, in time, and geographically, in space, from their own. They understood her as living a “not-yet-modern” rural life that was reflected in her painterly aesthetic. The result was a narrative that centred on the ordinariness of Lewis’s artistic technique and of her economic circumstance, nodes that were easily intersected in the moving image and overlaid narration of the screen media format.

The CBC’s *Telescope* series was the ideal visual introduction to Lewis’s ordinary life, since the nature of the program format facilitated a glimpse into her and Everett’s everyday activities in Digby County through the authority of those who could authenticate her folk artist status in the first place. CBC’s *Telescope* aired from 1963 to 1972, hosted by writer, director, and film producer Fletcher Markle (Fig. 3). “The mainstay of *Telescope*,” as film historian Blaine Allan notes, “was the personality profile of the Canadian, whether a national figure, international celebrity, or a notable unknown citizen.”³⁹ *Telescope*’s narration of Lewis firmly positioned her within this third categorization, offering the viewing audience a window into Lewis’s life story by emphasizing her disconnection from the modernizing society around her, the simplicity of her daily life, and her appeal to tourists visiting Nova Scotia. The program opened with the words of Kathleen MacNeil, whom Markle identified as “Mrs. Lloyd MacNeil” and described later on in the



3 | Still of host Fletcher Markle in front of a Maud Lewis painting of an oxen team, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

broadcast as Lewis’s “friend and unofficial advisor.” “A poet is without honour in his own country,” MacNeil declared, “and that’s the way it was with Maud. She needed outside recognition before the people in this area were aware of her work.” Markle reinforced MacNeil’s positioning of Lewis as isolated from her immediate community by emphasizing the disruption of her once happy childhood by her parents’ deaths. “Once upon a time in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, there lived a little girl named Maud,” Markle recounted, “the harness-maker’s daughter. Maud loved sleigh bells and buggy rides and big black oxen, and she painted Christmas cards and sold them around town for five cents apiece. She was very happy. And then her parents died and she went to live with an aunt in Digby.”⁴⁰ The program’s foray into ordinariness facilitated a reading of Lewis as someone who saw increased hardship during her lifetime, but who nevertheless overcame it through the recognition of sophisticated outsiders who understood the value of her cultural production.

The *Telescope* program convincingly framed Lewis as an outcast of modernity who was in constant search of companionship and love, in the absence of nuclear family support. Markle pointed out that Lewis’s childhood happiness was interrupted by the deaths of her parents, and he also noted that after moving in with her aunt in Digby, Lewis “still painted a little. But



4 | Still of Maud Lewis painting, surrounded by her decorated household items, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

she worked very hard around the house and after she grew up she became badly crippled with arthritis and she was very lonely. Since Lewis was already in her thirties when she moved to Digby, it is worth noting the narrative’s strange collapse in time – imposed, perhaps, to enhance the fairy-tale quality of the story which continues as follows: “Now, not far away there was an illiterate farm hand named Everett Lewis and he was lonely too. And just like in a storybook when Maud and Everett met, they suddenly weren’t lonely anymore. Within a week they were married. That was nigh on thirty years ago.”⁴¹ In this way, Markle’s narrative establishes an interrelation between Maud’s declining happiness and its rejuvenation through her marriage to Everett. The account goes on to illustrate how, “with Everett urging her on,” Maud “began to paint in earnest – the buggies and the oxen, the birds and the lobster boats of her happy childhood, painting in a joyful, primitive

style all her own” (Fig. 4).⁴² As such, *Telescope*’s narrative positioned Everett and Maud’s marriage as a supportive gesture that enabled Maud to pursue her natural artistic talents, thus creating a sense of optimism through a tale of reciprocal life-building that used love to forestall discussion of either partner’s situation within the social and economic structures of late-capitalist modernity in Nova Scotia.⁴³

Maud’s life with Everett in their little Marshalltown home also provided the necessary evidence to organize her optimism through her marriage and relative – albeit precarious – material security, thus circumventing more difficult social questions about access to education or an unstable labour market. Indeed the film’s narrative of love made it possible to sidestep Lewis’s lack of the professional training that could have helped her negotiate art-world circles for economic benefit. If anything, Lewis’s lack of artistic education was embraced as a factor in her financial success: “She’s never had a lesson,” Markle insisted, “never been to an art gallery, never met any other painters. Tourists discovered her bright bold work, took it home to admiring friends and now she can’t keep up with the demand.”⁴⁴ This lack of formal artistic training became a catalyst for Markle to explain Lewis’s pursuit of painting as a novelty – one that attracted the interest of tourists passing through Marshalltown to see the house she shared with her husband. In order to validate the tourist interest in Lewis’s work Markle, like Barnard, enlisted the authority of Claire Stenning and Bill Ferguson. “I just can’t understand why she hasn’t been found sooner,” Stenning pondered (Fig. 5), noting further that Lewis’s work was something that only the “more sophisticated members of the community” in Digby County were aware of.⁴⁵ “Some tourists passing through dropped in with one of the Lewis paintings looking for a frame,” Ferguson offered in turn, “and we were so delighted with what we saw that we had to find out where they came from and we hunted her down.”⁴⁶ By providing the very proficiency that the *Telescope* episode established Lewis as lacking, art-world experts thus endorsed the wider public recognition of Lewis’s talent in tourist circles, and also showed that her partnership with Everett fulfilled a promise of material security, precarious as it might be.

Often, the *Telescope* episode made a narrative connection between the tourist support of Lewis’s painting and her optimistic overcoming of a precarious daily life through these limited financial exchanges. Accordingly, the episode suggested that the modern society around Maud and Everett marginalized them in their home environment, and thereby ironically nurtured the perfect “closed” atmosphere for folk-art creation. What is more, the *Telescope* broadcast’s establishment of Lewis’s isolation in Marshalltown resulted not only in proof that her contact with the outside world came about through tourist channels, but also of her continued separation from



5 | Still of Claire Stenning at Ten Mile House gallery, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

professional artistic spheres. As Barnard noted in his article, Lewis had so far “been able to resist the urging of well-meaning acquaintances that she ‘improve’ her style and paint like everybody else.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Markle again solicited expert commentary to support such claims, this time through another of Barnard’s sources, John Cook, who provided insight into this aesthetic valuation of Lewis’s paintings. “Mrs. Lewis’s work is valid,” Cook confirmed. “It’s a direct statement of things experienced or imagined and very forthright in their statement and use of colour and her drawing – definitely works of art. Possibly minor works of art, but still, she has something to say and she’s saying it.”⁴⁸ Throughout the *Telescope* episode, the program emphasized that Lewis was an artist whose creative knowledge was directly informed by her rural circumstance, as opposed to the conventions of formal composition that she would have learned in an art school or by way of museum and gallery contact. At the same time, it presented her ordinary milieu as sustaining her material and cultural marginality.

What the episode ultimately advanced, however, was a perspective on the Lewises that established the couple as outsiders even amongst rural Digby County residents, because of their continued resistance to the forces of

modernization that public history makers saw transforming Nova Scotia as a whole. The fact that rural residents such as the Lewises were both absorbed into the structure of production and resistant to it through their making and distribution of independent commodities is largely ignored, since the Lewises' life in Digby County is here understood as decidedly separate from a process of modernization that it was, in reality, quite connected to.⁴⁹ Ferguson, for example, suggested that Maud and Everett's isolation in Marshalltown made them "unique characters" in the area and thereby attracted outsider attention – even if, as he jested for the camera, "Nova Scotia is full of characters."⁵⁰ This justification of the supposedly strange simplicity of the Lewises' rural countryside home and the so-called outside world of tourist visitors also served the idea that Maud and Everett fulfilled their own needs in life through a reciprocal investment in their customers. "They do love talking to the people passing by," Stenning elucidated, "the tourists and so forth, and they get a great deal out of this. So their wants are really quite simple: their meeting with the general public and their animals and their little plot of ground and so forth. They don't want much."⁵¹ Ultimately, *Telescope* provided evidence that the Lewises' ordinariness was worthy of public consideration, since it spoke to their ability to successfully negotiate a phase of capitalism that had fundamentally challenged the ways in which most rural Digby County residents lived, and what they aspired to.

Establishing this evidence throughout the *Telescope* episode meant presenting Maud and Everett as remnants of an age gone by, one marked by the sustained manual labour of Everett's farm and field work and the peddling of fish, together with Maud's paintings, in his Model T Ford. To be sure, such activities were framed as sites of unproductive labour that existed outside of a capitalist market.⁵² "As Maud Lewis creates," Markle explained, "husband Everett toils away at tasks he learned as a boy, chores he has performed for six decades with a kind of dignity that is characteristic of him."⁵³ The accompanying footage showed Everett cutting a field by hand with a sickle and digging up potatoes from his backyard garden with a rake (Fig. 6). "I only went hardly through the first grade," Everett's overlaid narration told the camera. "When I was a little fella, I went out to work. 10 years old, I milked five cows in the mornings. What had to be had to be. All the kids then had to work . . . Cause they had no pension in them days."⁵⁴ As the camera cuts away from Everett's work on the land to Lewis's work painting her panel boards in the house (Fig. 7), she recounts, "them days gone by. We used to have a phonograph with round records. It played a round record, great big hole in it! I can see it now," she recalled; "When You and I Were Young, Maggie", and all old-fashioned songs like that."⁵⁵ While Maud describes her memories of childhood, the camera pans to one of her paintings in progress,



6 | Still of Everett Lewis gathering potatoes, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

portraying an oxen team hauling logs. “There was no cars in them days. It was all horses,” Lewis went on. “I remember a time when we used to go out for buggy rides. My father used to harness a span of horses and go for all day . . . I remember them, plain . . . Them was the days. You can travel faster now, you can go a long ways in a car.”⁵⁶ The central elements of the *Telescope* episode thereby established the Lewises’ broader connection to Euro-America’s agrarian childhood – one that had, by the last few decades of the twentieth century, long been displaced by an age of capitalist maturity that transferred farm work away from such sustenance-based local labour.⁵⁷ Indeed, modernization transformed the countryside in ways that its residents helped to shape through their subsistence living and part-time labour. But while these activities were quickly folded into the industrializing capitalist strategy, rurality itself remained a much less flexible cultural construction.

The result was a narrative that confirmed Maud Lewis’s position as an isolated rural folk artist, that assigned her and Everett to the labour of decades past in which rural Nova Scotians grew and ate their own foodstuffs and



7 | Still of Maud Lewis painting a winter scene with evergreens and oxen team, from “The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, 25 November 1965, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (Photo: Courtesy of the CBC)

travelled by horse and buggy, and that helped to constitute an optimistic encounter that replaced a complex and integrated modernization with a simple country existence. The “once-upon-a-time-world” of Maud Lewis presented in the 1965 *Telescope* episode was appealing in this regard because it provided a means to narrate the ordinary from the viewpoint of those who feared late capitalism’s disruption of the Lewises’ supposedly traditional rural lifestyle, particularly in terms of the way it might affect her art production. What is more, a perspective emerged that positioned the Lewises not as acting in resistance to modernity – a tactic that rural Nova Scotians had been criticized for adopting in the previous decade⁵⁸ – so much as simply being unable to adapt to it. This perspective was often negotiated in aesthetic terms. Following the broadcast, for example, a 1967 issue of the Fredericton-based *Atlantic Advocate* magazine published a feature-length article on Lewis, describing one of her paintings, “with its fresh, clear outlines and

primitive colours,” and marvelling at how such an aesthetically pleasing vision had arisen through the out-of-date material realities of her home environment. “The front door, storm door and window are gaily decorated with birds, flowers and butterflies,” the author, Doris McCoy, explained. “The interior of the house, including the massive, ancient stove, has also been treated to brilliantly coloured designs.”⁵⁹ Maud Lewis’s old-fashioned life in Marshalltown is therefore both the source of her artistic inspiration and, paradoxically, of her hardship and poverty, a contrast that only helped to optimistically reframe the contemporary rural experience at this time.

Neither conventional perceptions about the rural and the urban, nor the past and the present were easily disentangled from the iconography of Lewis’s paintings, however, since her work often lent itself to nostalgic readings of historical rural life. In fact, Lewis’s work helped public history makers articulate the parameters of her life in late twentieth-century Nova Scotia in ways that conjured up romantic ideas about the province’s modernization on the whole. For example, the Digby County-based author and playwright Lance Woolaver began tracing his community’s contemporary landscapes through the vision of the past he saw Lewis’s paintings representing. Woolaver later expressed the belief that his interest in narrating Lewis’s life story began when he searched “for a story to accompany the paintings” by arranging his family’s collection of Lewis’s works according to season.⁶⁰ As he reordered the grouping, “moving them back and forth,” placing “the winter scenes on the left, the summer ones on the right,” he “saw that Maud had captured every happiness in Digby County: every trade – a fisherman hauling lobster traps, a farmer plowing a field, a blacksmith in his forge; every place – the little bridge and brook in Acacia Valley, the old wharf in Barton, the lighthouse at Point Prim; every animal, flower and bird – cats in the tulips, oxen under the summer bower, robins in the apple blossoms.”⁶¹ The ongoing investment in claiming a rural story of optimism in Nova Scotia also served to create an affectual structure in which Lewis’s past images of simple country life could continue to define the Digby County experience into the future, even if many public history makers invested in this construction could no longer visualize such places in the present outside of Lewis’s works.

The connection between Lewis’s domestic environment as a material symbol of “art for art’s sake,” in the most conventional understanding of the phrase, was also a way for public history makers to recast late twentieth-century Nova Scotia’s crisis of the ordinary, which saw many in the province clinging to economic self-sufficiency as a social value, despite the fact that the market actually folded such labour into the logic of industrialization and urbanization.⁶² In other words, rural residents such as Everett and Maud Lewis were just as embedded in systems of capitalist development through

their peddling of paintings as were their urban counterparts whose labour could be more easily categorized as formal. Indeed, this was true even if the folk art construct necessitated using the iconographic content of Lewis's artwork to separate her cultural production from the benefits of its material value: "Mrs. Maude [sic] Lewis loves animals. She loves people. She loves life," McCoy revealed. "Money, beyond what is required to buy food and fuel, is a matter of complete indifference to her."⁶³ The idea that Lewis overcame her economic hardships through the free creation of painting her home environment also gave credence to the mythic construction of folk art as an instance of autonomous free creation. Such a presentation, however, has deep historical roots in the standard classification system of art objects and in the foundations of modern art historical scholarship.⁶⁴ In Lewis's case, this meant grounding her painting in terms of the Kantian notion of the highest form of creative expression, "art for art's sake," rather than the lowest, the production of utilitarian and commercial objects. If, according to this logic, free creation had to remain separate from material gain, then in order to establish Lewis as an autonomous free creator her painting had to be both separated from its material labour and reconfigured as the root of her optimism in the face of poverty.

Ultimately, establishing Lewis as a folk artist necessitated situating her economic marginality as both the source of her folk identity and as a manifestation of her ordinary worldly circumstance that she could visualize in her paintings – an ordinariness that she could only overcome through the optimism that free creative expression brought with it. As it happened, this was the narrative about Lewis's artwork that would determine her treatment in public history initiatives long after her death on 30 July 1970, the result of complications from a broken hip she had suffered a few years earlier. Local newspapers recorded her passing with articles that expressed how widely Lewis's artwork had become known, with a *Digby Courier* article noting, "Today Mrs. Lewis's paintings grace the White House in Washington, two having been commissioned by President Nixon. Other paintings have been commissioned by Opposition Leader Robert L. Stanfield. These paintings are in his home."⁶⁵ Similarly, the Halifax *Chronicle Herald* reported that Lewis was "the subject of a number of feature articles in national and international magazines and art journals."⁶⁶ As Lewis's "fame grew," the same article stated, "orders for her paintings increased and soon her frail health was taxed to the utmost to keep up with the demand."⁶⁷ With little commentary surrounding the actual economic circumstances that shaped Lewis's dependency on folk painting as a condition of her working life, the public history of her death in 1970 also helped to centralize the iconographic content of her painting as the root of her posthumous life story.

Up until this point, public history makers focused on the strength of the Lewises' marital relationship and, in particular, used Everett's negotiation of financial exchange surrounding Maud's artwork sales to reinscribe the fact that she painted for creative expression rather than for economic necessity.⁶⁸ Earlier representations of Maud and Everett's relationship in the *Star Weekly*, *Telescope*, and the *Atlantic Advocate*, for example, described Everett as the "first [person who] discovered his wife's artistic talent and urged her to develop it,"⁶⁹ as a "peddler [who is] very astute when it comes to business,"⁷⁰ and as "an itinerant peddler, [who] is a quiet, good-natured man."⁷¹ Moreover, in the CBC *Telescope* broadcast, Markle described Everett as "a kind of business manager," who "cuts the board on which his wife paints."⁷² Markle then went on to interview Maud about the cost she charged for her paintings, as she explained, "my prices have gone up some. I used to charge four and a half for them, but they've gone up fifty cents – five dollars. The paint costs a lot, you see. Boards, and oil colours, they all went up, so I went up in my price, five dollars. Some don't want to pay that much, and others don't mind at all."⁷³ Markle then interjected, "But if someone insisted that she take ten dollars, would she take it?"⁷⁴ Maud responded with a smile and a laugh, "oh, yes!"⁷⁵ Later on in the program, Maud's direct engagement with such financial exchanges is reinforced through a shot of her selling a painting of three black cats to a visitor for five U.S. dollars. The result of these earlier public history narrations of Maud and Everett is that the affectual interpretation of love substitutes for the materialist need of either partner, since Maud is framed as painting for joy, while Everett is understood as selling paintings in dutiful support of his wife.⁷⁶

Yet many public history makers invested in narrating Lewis's legacy came to advance readings of Lewis's paintings as being more closely connected to her material situation. Not the least of these was Cora Greenaway, producer of the CBC radio and television broadcasts on Lewis during the 1960s. While Greenaway did not offer direct commentary in either of these programs, she was interviewed as part of the NFB's 1998 *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* documentary,⁷⁷ and also authored a 1988 article entitled "Maud's Folk Fantasies," which she published in the April issue of *Century Home* magazine.⁷⁸ Both her article and her onscreen interview provide some insight into Greenaway's understanding of Lewis's life, part of which can be read as an exercise in feminist claiming of Lewis's story, particularly in terms of using the artist's aesthetic to explain her struggle in material terms. Remarking on Lewis's days in Marshalltown for the 1998 documentary, for example, Greenaway told the camera, "The contrast between her daily life and her paintings was day and night. I would say that her daily life was poor, it was poor in every way – poor in the way she lived and poor in mind."⁷⁹



8 | Maud Lewis, *Sleigh and Village Scene*, ca. 1960, oil on pulpboard, 26.3 × 30.1 cm, on loan to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia from the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1995. (Photo: Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia)

However, Greenaway was quick to argue that despite Lewis's poverty, the artist did not succumb to producing paintings that were salable, but rather worked to express her innate creativity. According to Greenaway, Lewis had "an inborn feeling for composition, a sense of colour and a sharp observant eye."⁸⁰ To make this point, Greenaway went on to describe Lewis's use of bright primary colours to portray scenes of daily life in Digby County, as in *Sleigh and Village Scene* (Fig. 8), which depicts a horse-drawn sleigh riding under a cloudy cerulean sky and over a snowy hillside dotted with evergreens and multicoloured leafy trees. For Greenaway, the use of such pigments was a testament to Lewis's creative expression, rather than her need to gain profit from their sale. "Asked how she could paint a snow scene with trees with

yellow, green and red leaves,” Greenaway remembered, “her answer was ‘Bare trees are so dull, and besides a freak snowfall does happen in the fall.’”⁸¹ The same discourse of inner creativity enabled Greenaway to tie the artist’s output to social considerations by presenting Lewis’s art as a way for her to imaginatively escape the material impoverishment of her reality.

The precise significance of Lewis’s paintings in the 1960s and 70s was that public history makers such as Greenaway later used them to reimagine the rural Nova Scotian experience as one of a noble response to poverty rather than as one that was both resistant to and integrated into the modernizing development strategies of the postwar period. This period brought with it a new brand of optimism, as public history makers in Nova Scotia became increasingly concerned with framing the socio-economic realities of Maud Lewis’s life in cultural terms, since representing the provincial transition from rural to urban living was about much more than maintaining a living wage in industry’s margins. More than this, the conditions in which rural residents such as Lewis lived helped to shape ideas about a precarious population whose very existence was dependent on the destabilizing stages of late capitalism. Indeed, without the noble efforts of the rural working poor, there would be nothing for urbanite public history makers to remain optimistic about, since the ordinary struggle that rural people represented was becoming increasingly normalized – or, at the very least, remained one without an easy development solution. The ordinary is affectual in this regard because, as Berlant argues, it is “an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.”⁸² If the activities represented in Lewis’s paintings, from travel in horse-drawn buggies to farm and fishing work, no longer organized everyday life in rural Nova Scotia in the 1960s and 1970s, they could at least help to visualize the crisis of the ordinary in that present by creating a joyful representation of its past simplicity. In short, if Maud and Everett Lewis could no longer be found peddling fish and panel paintings to their neighbours and to tourist passersby, the public history perspective on their ordinary life had to transition as well.

NOTES

- 1 Much of my reading of optimism in the context of late capitalism is informed by Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), in which she examines “that moral-intimate-economic thing called ‘the good life’” in optimistic experiences (2). Optimism is cruel, as she puts it, “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining

- regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2).
- 2 Margaret CONRAD, “The 1950s: The Decade of Development,” in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 382.
 - 3 Ibid., 384.
 - 4 Della STANLEY, “The 1960s: The Illusions and Realities of Progress,” in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, 421.
 - 5 John REID, “The 1970s: Sharpening the Sceptical Edge,” in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, 460.
 - 6 Colin HOWELL, “Economism, Ideology, and the Teaching of Maritime History,” in *Teaching Maritime Studies*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1986), 18.
 - 7 Ibid.
 - 8 Daniel SAMSON, “Introduction: Situating the Rural in Atlantic Canada,” in *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800–1950*, ed. Daniel Sampson (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press for the Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies, 1994), 1–33.
 - 9 Scholarly attention to Lewis’s work that considers it from a critical perspective outside of such public history sources has been scant. Exceptions include two MA theses produced at Queen’s University, Sarah Elizabeth JONES, “Filming the Folk Artist-Genius: The ‘Documentation’ of Maud Lewis” (MA thesis, Queen’s University, 2009) and Laurie DALTON, “The Scotiabank Maud Lewis Gallery and the ‘Folking Over’ of Nova Scotia” (MA thesis, Queen’s University, 2003), and a recent article by Alicia BOUTILIER, “Myths and Chosen Emphases: Representations of Maud Lewis’s Life and Art,” in *Raven Papers: Remembering Natalie Luckyj (1945–2002)*, ed. Angela Carr (Manotick, ON: Penumbra Press, 2010), 133–57.
 - 10 Lance Gerard WOOLAVER, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1996), viii.
 - 11 “Digby’s Artist, Maude [sic] Lewis, Laid to Rest,” *Digby Courier*, 6 Aug. 1970.
 - 12 Mrs. WALLIS, “Mrs. Everett (Maude [sic] Lewis,” 5 Mar. 1964, typed interview transcript, Maud Lewis Artist’s File, AGNS.
 - 13 Harold PEARSE, “The Serial Imagery of Maud Lewis,” *Arts Atlantic* 15:2 (1997): 26.
 - 14 Bernard Riordon, interview with the author, Fredericton, New Brunswick, 9 Aug. 2007.
 - 15 Kathleen STEWART, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
 - 16 BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 14.
 - 17 Jill BENNETT, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10.
 - 18 BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
 - 19 The collected essays in Forbes and Del Muise’s seminal anthology *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* suggest that Nova Scotia experienced what David Harvey (David HARVEY, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* [London: Verso, 2006]) refers to as “uneven geographic development” throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Margaret CONRAD’s essay in *The Atlantic Provinces* argues that during the 1950s, which she calls the “decade of development,” there were in fact “two Atlantic Canadas, one largely rural

- and isolated . . . the other essentially urban and fully integrated into mainstream North American culture . . . ” (“The 1950s: The Decade of Development,” 382). As concentrated urban areas such as Halifax industrialized quickly, Conrad notes that “[t]he development ethic was also turned against the region’s workers, who were often accused of scaring away elusive capital investment by their attempts to resist exploitation” (391). By the 1960s, however, Della Stanley’s chapter points out that “[f]aith in material progress was accompanied by an optimistic and egalitarian idealism” (“The 1960s: The Illusions and Realities of Progress,” 421). This was indeed a time in which the faulty promises of modernization became evident, even if industrial expansion wrought benefits for some sectors in terms of employment.
- 20 Doris MCCOY, “Frail Woman with a Bold Brush,” *The Atlantic Advocate* (January 1967): 36–39.
 - 21 “Digby’s Artist, Maude [sic] Lewis, Laid to Rest.”
 - 22 WOOLAVER, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, 2.
 - 23 Peter D’ENTREMONT, dir., *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1998), DVD, 50:00.00.; WOOLAVER, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, 4.
 - 24 Bernard RIORDON, “Director’s Report,” in *Art Gallery of Nova Scotia Annual Report, 1998–1999* (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1999), 4.
 - 25 Ian Laidlaw conducted the interview with Maud Lewis on 27 February 1964 for use on the CBC radio program *Trans-Canada Matinee*. I base my description of Greenaway as a heritage activist on her widespread work in building Nova Scotia’s heritage industry, including her foundational role in developing the Heritage Trust in Canada in 1959, which eventually led to the formation of Heritage Canada in 1973. Greenaway is well-known for her actions in the “discovery” and preservation of various sites in Nova Scotia, among them Halifax’s Historic Properties, the Ross Farm, and the Croscup Room, a nineteenth-century painted parlour originally situated in a home in Karsdale, which, after Greenaway’s twenty-year battle, was bought and preserved by the National Gallery of Canada. For more on the Croscup Room, see Cora GREENAWAY, “Decorated Walls and Ceilings in Nova Scotia,” *Material Culture Bulletin* 15 (Summer 1982): 83–89.
 - 26 Brooks later explained that, when the editors of Toronto’s *Star Weekly* magazine heard the radio broadcast, they “thought that the quaint story would appeal to their readers.” The magazine editors asked Brooks to do a photo-story on Lewis and, at the time, Brooks remembered that he “had no idea who she was.” The photographs from Brooks’s initial visit to the Lewises have since been used to illustrate several popular print treatments of Lewis. See Bob BROOKS and Lance WOOLAVER, *Maud’s Country: Landscapes that Inspired the Art of Maud Lewis* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1999), 3.
 - 27 Murray BARNARD, “The Little Old Lady Who Paints Pretty Pictures,” *Toronto Star Weekly*, 10 July 1965.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, 13.
 - 29 SAMSON, “Introduction: Situating the Rural in Atlantic Canada,” 14.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, 13.
 - 31 BARNARD, “The Little Old Lady Who Paints Pretty Pictures,” 13.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, 14.
 - 33 *Ibid.*
 - 34 *Ibid.*
 - 35 STANLEY, “The 1960s: The Illusions and Realities of Progress,” 445.

- 36 BARNARD, “The Little Old Lady Who Paints Pretty Pictures,” 14.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Johannes FABIAN’s foundational argument in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) critically assesses the anthropological trope of allochronic distancing, which ensures that the ethnographer maintains a coeval and spatial separation from their subject. The ethnographic subject, as a result, “would *never have time* to become part of the ethnographer’s past,” or of their empirical present, because the discipline of anthropology itself is built around such “temporal discourse” (i). This means, for example, that disciplinary anthropology has typically constructed and understood so-called “primitive” or “folk” societies as being childlike, or underdeveloped, in relation to the time-space matrix of the West’s empirical present. Raymond WILLIAMS’s *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) likewise establishes a context in which literary producers narrated English country life as a separate and distinct living space from the historical realities of rural life. Indeed, “the great problem of English rural history” for such elite urban writers was that it spoke to “the endless complication of intermediate classes,” and thereby necessitated the creation of a detached geography between the country and the city, even if there were no easy ways to slot them into separate epochs (40–41; 35).
- 39 Blaine ALLAN, “Telescope,” *CBC Television Series, 1952–1982*. Accessed 10 May 2013, <http://www.film.queensu.ca/cbc/T.html>
- 40 “The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis,” *Telescope*, DVD, 25 Nov. 1965, 21:30.00, CBC Radio and Television Archives.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 181.
- 44 “The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis.”
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 BARNARD, “The Little Old Lady Who Paints Pretty Pictures,” 14.
- 48 “The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis.”
- 49 Henry VELTMEYER, “The Capitalist Underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada,” in *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada*, ed. Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1979), 26–28.
- 50 “The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis.”
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 VELTMEYER, “The Capitalist Underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada,” 29.
- 53 “The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis.”
- 54 Everett Lewis quoted in *ibid.*
- 55 Maud Lewis quoted in *ibid.*
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 David GOODMAN and Michael WATTS, “Agrarian Questions: Global Appetite, Local Metabolism: Nature, Culture, and Industry in *Fin-de-Siècle* Agro-food Systems,” in *Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring*, ed. David Goodman and Michael Watts (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.
- 58 CONRAD, “The 1950s: The Decade of Development,” 391.
- 59 MCCOY, “Frail Woman with a Bold Brush,” 39.
- 60 WOOLAVER, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, xix.

- 61 Ibid.
- 62 As Daniel Samson argues, for example, industrialization and urbanization was made possible in the Maritimes because of the fact that seasonal rural workers such as the Lewises laboured in their immediate communities for subsistence rather than for profit during the early to mid-twentieth century. What this meant was that Nova Scotia's modernization depended on a subsistence economy as much as it did on a commercial one. For more, see SAMSON, "Introduction: Situating the Rural in Atlantic Canada," 1–33.
- 63 MCCOY, "Frail Woman with a Bold Brush," 39.
- 64 Michael PODRO, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), xxi; Donald PREZIOSI, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 9–11; Ruth B. PHILLIPS and Christopher B. STEINER, eds., "Introduction: Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 6–15.
- 65 AGNS, Maud Lewis Artist's File, Kathy Lynch, "Maud Lewis: Artist Dies at 67," untitled, undated newspaper clipping.
- 66 "Digby's Artist, Mrs. Maude [sic] Lewis Dies," *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 1 Aug. 1970.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 In her master's thesis, Sarah Jones makes the astute observation that both NFB documentaries position Everett as Maud's "Kantian counterpoint . . . He serves as a marker for the material world, a fixed point that [Maud], in contrast, transcends." See JONES, "Filming the Folk Artist-Genius: The 'Documentation' of Maud Lewis," 14.
- 69 BARNARD, "The Little Old Lady Who Paints Pretty Pictures," 13.
- 70 Claire Stenning quoted in "The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis."
- 71 MCCOY, "Frail Woman with a Bold Brush," 39.
- 72 Markle quoted in "The-Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis."
- 73 Maud Lewis quoted in *ibid.*
- 74 Markle quoted in *ibid.*
- 75 Maud Lewis quoted in *ibid.*
- 76 BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 181.
- 77 Woolaver mentions the 1965 *Telescope* broadcast as the first in a series of "outsider" (that is, outside of Digby County) interest in Lewis. In 2006, the provincial government awarded Greenaway the Order of Nova Scotia for her work in promoting regional culture and heritage. Among the many things for which the Order praised Greenaway was her discovery and promotion of Lewis during the 1960s. Curiously, this discovery is not documented in the 1998 NFB documentary *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, which contains an interview with Greenaway about Lewis's life. In this film, Greenaway is identified as an art historian and not as someone who knew Lewis personally, thereby giving her a position of critical objectivity in relation to her biographical subject.
- 78 Cora GREENAWAY, "Maud's Folk Fantasies," *Century Home* (April 1988): 59.
- 79 Greenaway quoted in D'ENTREMONT, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, DVD.
- 80 GREENAWAY, "Maud's Folk Fantasies," 59.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 8.

Affects ordinaires : l'art populaire, Maud Lewis et l'esthétique sociale du quotidien

ERIN MORTON

Dans le présent article, nous examinons comment les artisans de l'histoire publique ont utilisé les artistes autodidactes pour fonder la catégorie de l'art populaire en Nouvelle-Écosse à la fin du xx^e siècle en nous appuyant sur le cas particulier de la peintre autodidacte Maud Lewis (1903–1970), de Marshalltown. Nous soulevons tout d'abord une question conceptuelle sur le discours de l'art populaire lui-même – à savoir le rôle qu'a joué cette catégorie en tant que forme d'expression optimiste dans les efforts déployés par les créateurs de l'histoire publique en Nouvelle-Écosse à la fin du xx^e siècle pour composer avec les crises particulières du capitalisme tardif. Nous avançons ensuite que les peintures de Maud Lewis sont devenues les manifestations les plus réussies de l'art populaire en Nouvelle-Écosse parce que l'histoire de la vie de cette artiste offrait une combinaison opportune d'éléments narratifs que l'on pouvait exploiter au profit de l'optimisme. Pour les artisans de l'histoire publique, cette femme pauvre, handicapée et isolée transcendait la réalité matérielle en mutation de la province par la joyeuse liberté que lui procurait la peinture populaire. Elle apparaissait donc comme une figure optimiste dans un climat socioéconomique maussade.

Nous élaborons le cadre de travail critique de l'« affect ordinaire », dans lequel nous entendons situer les récits publics de la vie de Lewis. Les affects ordinaires sont, comme nous le définissons dans cet article, des sentiments ou des fantasmes que les acteurs institutionnels ont produits et fait circuler au sujet du triomphe de l'histoire de l'art populaire sur l'adversité du capitalisme tardif. Que relate en définitive l'histoire publique sur la vie de Maud Lewis à cet égard? Des récits romanesques sur des artistes ruraux autodidactes qui se débattent passivement avec la modernisation au lieu de la façonner activement ou de la contester. Cette stratégie conceptuelle tient aussi compte de l'invitation de la théoricienne littéraire Lauren Berlant à fournir un contexte matérialiste à la théorie de l'affect. Nous soulignons ainsi que le récit de la vie de Lewis relevait autant de la lutte contre la pensée présentiste sur l'art, l'économie et la vie sociale que de la définition de l'art populaire en tant que catégorie d'objet historique. De plus, nous étudions les paramètres

fondamentaux des récits publics de la vie de Lewis. Nous avançons en outre que le concept d'art populaire fournissait un contexte matériel à l'optimisme qui régnait en Nouvelle-Écosse à la fin du xx^e siècle, période marquée par une évolution mondiale galopante. Selon nous, l'art populaire de Maud Lewis est devenu aux yeux des artisans de l'histoire publique un symbole idéal pour faire valoir leurs points de vue devant les changements amenés par le capitalisme tardif, aussi bien sur le plan culturel que politicoéconomique.

L'histoire de Maud et de son mari Everett menant une vie précaire à la campagne, à l'écart de la modernisation ambiante, offrait un potentiel d'optimisme que les créateurs de l'histoire publique ont vite mis à profit. Tout au long des années 1960 et 1970, la réputation de Maud Lewis avait dépassé de loin sa communauté locale. En effet, sa vie quotidienne et ses processus de création avaient fait l'objet de reportages à la radio et à la télévision de langue anglaise de Radio-Canada (CBC), de documentaires de l'ONF, et d'articles dans la presse populaire. La première manifestation de l'histoire publique qui a propulsé l'histoire de Maud Lewis dans la vie publique au-delà de Marshalltown a été une entrevue menée en 1964 dans le cadre d'une émission à la radio de la CBC intitulée *Trans-Canada Matinee*. Alida K. (Cora) Greenaway, journaliste-pigiste et militante pour la survie du patrimoine, travaillait à la CBC en Nouvelle-Écosse. Grâce à son reportage, l'histoire de l'artiste a suscité un vaste intérêt. Ainsi, en juillet 1965, à la suite de cette radiodiffusion, le magazine *Star Weekly* de Toronto a publié un article illustré sur Lewis. Il était accompagné d'une série de photos de Maud et d'Everett Lewis prises par Bob Brooks, ainsi que d'un texte de l'écrivain Murray Barnard décrivant la vie quotidienne des Lewis « dans une maison si petite qu'on aurait dit qu'elle avait été construite pour Tom Pouce ». L'article de Barnard dépeignait Maud Lewis comme la « Grandma Moses du Canada », ouvrant la voie à la réalisation d'un reportage pour la série télévisée *Telescope* de la CBC en 1965. Intitulée *Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maude [sic] Lewis*, cette émission de trente minutes présentait la vie quotidienne des Lewis sur un mode semblable à celui de l'article de Barnard. Elle fournissait par ailleurs de l'information contextuelle sur les œuvres de Lewis provenant de plusieurs des mêmes sources. La série *Telescope* permettait d'offrir une introduction visuelle idéale à la vie ordinaire des Lewis, le format de l'émission facilitant la découverte des activités quotidiennes de Maud et d'Everett au comté de Digby par l'entremise des témoignages dignes de foi d'observateurs bien placés pour authentifier son statut de peintre d'art populaire. Or, dans toutes ces sources d'histoire publique, le récit de la vie de l'artiste reflétait de toute évidence l'espace géographique et régional du sous-développement de la culture « populaire », marginalisée par des conditions de vie que la modernisation urbaine aurait, pensait-on, rapidement balayées dans toute la province.

À l'instar du fermier traditionnel qui participait à l'économie de la Nouvelle-Écosse par un travail axé sur la subsistance plutôt que sur le profit, Maud Lewis illustrait parfaitement un mode de vie que de nombreux artisans de l'histoire publique croyaient en voie de disparition. L'émission *Telescope* décrivait de façon convaincante l'artiste comme une exclue de la modernité, à la recherche constante de compagnie et d'amour en l'absence du soutien d'une famille nucléaire. Ce portrait de la vie de Maud avec Everett dans leur maisonnette de Marshalltown permettait également d'expliquer l'optimisme de l'artiste par le bonheur de son mariage et sa sécurité matérielle relative, quoique précaire. Il passait toutefois sous silence les délicates questions sociales de l'accès à l'éducation et de l'instabilité du marché du travail. En articulant le récit de l'émission autour de l'amour de Maud et d'Everett, on pouvait en outre faire abstraction du manque de formation professionnelle de l'artiste, formation qui aurait pu l'aider à se tailler une place dans les cercles mondiaux de l'art et d'en tirer des avantages économiques. Or, si l'épisode de *Telescope* mettait cette lacune en évidence, il présentait en revanche les témoignages d'experts possédant une vaste connaissance du milieu des arts. Ainsi, leur appréciation de l'œuvre de Lewis donnait corps à la reconnaissance dont elle jouissait dans les cercles touristiques et auprès du grand public. Ces témoignages montraient enfin que le mariage de l'artiste avec Everett remplissait une promesse de sécurité matérielle, aussi précaire put-elle être.

Notre recherche montre que le récit de l'histoire publique de Lewis a commencé des décennies avant que l'Art Gallery of Nova Scotia ne la revendique pour attiser l'intérêt de ses visiteurs dans les années 1980 et 1990. Le parcours de Lewis raconté par les artisans de l'histoire publique est important pour la catégorisation générale de l'art populaire en Nouvelle-Écosse parce qu'on peut retracer son origine dans de multiples lieux de diffusion – depuis les articles de journaux populaires jusqu'aux émissions de télévision, en passant plus tard par les films documentaires et les expositions d'art. Les tableaux de Lewis sont visiblement ceux que l'on associe le plus fortement à l'art populaire de la Nouvelle-Écosse à ce jour, ce qui fait de cette artiste la plus grande histoire à succès qu'a connue l'Art Gallery of Nova Scotia en s'intéressant à des peintres autodidactes. Notre article examine donc les répercussions profondes de l'investissement constant des artisans de l'histoire publique dans l'héritage de Lewis en particulier, ainsi que dans la catégorie de l'art populaire en général, afin d'expliquer pourquoi ce genre demeure une pierre angulaire de la culture néo-écossaise.