

Of the Blood: Race, History, and Memory in Formac's Fiction Treasures Series

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Of the Blood: Race, History, and Memory in Formac's Fiction Treasures Series

JOAN WISDOM IS AN ORPHAN GIRL, her parents lost at sea. Throughout her childhood she has been passed around from one fitfully attentive relation to another until she ends up in small-town Nova Scotia with her rheumatic Uncle Garrett, who has inherited the family fortune. Something comes over Joan, uneasily and slowly but nonetheless surely. While she has no definite memory of this town, intimations of an uncanny familiarity will not go away. Surely she has seen it all before? She cannot tell. When she meets Lisbeth, another orphaned girl, who lives with an old gypsy woman, Joan feels overcome by “that baffling sense of an occurrence which she could not recall, the tantalising dream fancy of having been there before with this girl with the black shadowy eyes.” Lisbeth knows the feeling. For the rest of Grace McLeod Rogers’s novel *Joan at Halfway* (1919), the two of them fumble after the buried life of their shared past – a journey that brings these lost girls back to themselves. Joan puts their situation into words when she tells Lisbeth, “Down inside me I feel so strong and tough, as if I could do such hard things and big things, and I wonder how I’ll ever get at them.” The way to get at their real selves will be a rediscovery of the place that has always really been theirs in a home that has become strange through the forgetting of their own history. Joan in particular will reopen “the well-spring of her ancestors,” a spiritual inheritance that would be for her “a fount of never-ending strength and refreshment . . . as the years went on.”¹

Joan at Halfway numbers among 30 Maritime novels from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that have been reissued as Formac Fiction Treasures, a series edited by Gwendolyn Davies and featuring introductions by scholars such as A.J.B. Johnston, Alan Wilson, and Greg Marquis (in addition to Davies herself); all of these works also incorporate a great deal of original research by each of the scholars through their introduction (and the resulting endnotes).² These novels were all originally published outside the Atlantic region at different times and places, so Formac has performed a true public service by gathering them together for the first

1 Grace McLeod Rogers, *Joan at Halfway*, introduction by Robin Sutherland (c. 1919; Halifax: Formac, 2007), 94, 118, 185.

2 The novels have varying connections to the Maritimes. Sometimes they are written by people from the region but take place elsewhere, as in the case of James De Mille’s *The Lady of the Ice*, introduction by George L. Parker (1870; Halifax: Formac, 2010). De Mille was born in Saint John, NB, and wrote this book while living in Nova Scotia, but the whole story takes place in Quebec City. Conversely, a book like Ralph Connor’s *The Arm of Gold*, introduction by John Lennox (c. 1932; Halifax: Formac, 2007) takes place almost entirely on Cape Breton Island – with a brief interlude in New York City – but the author lived in Winnipeg. In general, the original text of each novel has been reissued without alteration by the press, complete with period fonts. This means that many small errors remain from the original publications, though none significantly dampened my reading pleasure except in the case of Basil King’s *The High Heart*, introduction by Mary Lu MacDonald (1917; Halifax: Formac, 2011) – from which a page seems to have gone missing.

time. These are all beautiful books and I am happy to report that two more – Helen Milicete Duffus’s *The Strawberry Girls*, introduction by Janet B. Friskney (1929; Halifax: Formac, 2012) and Arthur Hunt Chute’s *The Crested Seas*, introduction by Gerald Hallowell (1928; Halifax: Formac, 2012) – have appeared just this autumn. To read these novels is to share something of the experience of Joan Wisdom. This Maritimes lies just over the horizon of memory. The familiar can suddenly become strange and what at first seems strange can call to mind something familiar.

The strangest and most impenetrable passages in my reading of these novels concerned race, and this review essay will concentrate on this theme for precisely this reason. As Robert Darnton has noted, “When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning.”³ Concentrating on the dimensions of these novels that seem the strangest may actually teach us the most about our past. Indeed, it is my contention that many of the passages in these novels that appear to be about race are actually about history. Moreover, these novels can be invaluable sources for historians. I will assume, along with Franco Moretti, that novels, although works of fiction, are not “*imaginary* object[s]” but “*historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria.”⁴ These books do not give us an objective and reliable transcript of the history, but they do show us the way in which that history was understood at a particular moment within its unfolding.⁵

3 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 5.

4 Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, rev. ed., trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988), 18, 9 (emphasis in original).

5 “Race” may well be the most vexing word in the academic lexicon. Bob Carter, in his *Realism and Racism: Concepts of Race in Sociological Research* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3, is surely correct to say that “uniquely in the pantheon of social scientific terms, ‘race’ is rarely allowed a public appearance without its minders, represented by the accompanying collar of inverted commas.” Explaining their decision to handle the term this way in their *Race’ & Ethnicity in Canada: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11, Vic Satezewich and Nikolaos Lioudakis say they “use quotation marks around the term ‘race’ to denote that the term is a socially constructed category for classifying humans, with no real biological referent and . . . with little analytical, *sui generis* value in the social sciences.” These commentators handle race with such elaborate care because it simultaneously wields immense power in the popular imagination while also having lost almost all scientific credibility, as well as being implicated in colonialism, slavery, and genocide along with more pervasive if less dramatic practices of stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion.

The meaning of the word “race” has varied according to time and context but, in the classical form attained by the Victorian era, race involves categorizing human beings into groups – e.g., Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid – on the basis of a biological constitution that the membership of each is taken to share by virtue of a posited common genetic origin. Indeed, all of the members of a race partake of a single racial essence. The presence of each racial essence will be easily recognized by a specifiable set of outward phenotypic markers (pre-eminently skin colour, but also the texture of hair, the thickness of lips, the shape of the face, etc.) and will ineluctably express itself in the differing moral qualities and intellectual capacities that mark each group. Having thus generated an array of different racial essences, shared by every member of each race but distinct from those of the others, anyone and everyone may be categorized, compared, and ranked according to their inescapable racial makeup.

The year was 1875. Anson Campbell had lived all his young life along the Fundy Shore, but never felt at home in his hometown. Anchorville drowsed in a complacent contentment that seemed to have endured “since the beginning of time.” The shade-trees, which graciously shielded the pleasant streets from the elements, “suggested permanency in their great trunks.” Beneath their venerable branches sat comfortable houses “snuggling in the tree-shadows like careful old ladies afraid of sun and wind.” An ambiance of “peaceful, unhurried contemplation” prevailed. But something inside Anson rebelled against it, and after we meet him at the beginning of Frederick William Wallace’s 1925 novel *Captain Salvation*, we read how he fights, drinks, and gets himself expelled from straitlaced Appletown Theological College. Anson only comes into his own after he has run away to sea, where both of his parents had perished years before. On the mighty Pacific Ocean, in the face of a lashing storm that terrifies all of the other seamen, his true self coursing through his blood suddenly awakens: “He had led the way; he had taken upon himself the most hazardous tasks; he had risked his life a hundred times, and men had obeyed his directions through mental and physical dominance.” It was bred in the bone. From his late father, a Bluenose sailorman, he had inherited “the determination and courage of his Northern ancestry” while from his mysterious Spanish mother came “the blood of aristocratic, adventure-seeking *conquistadores*.” Having suddenly grasped the implications of this forgotten conquistador blood, Anson knew why he had chafed against placid, straitlaced Anchorville and found himself on the wild, dangerous sea. His noble lineage “sought hazard as an antidote to *ennui*, as a traditional line of action for those who boasted blue blood.”⁶

Anson Campbell has many counterparts in the Formac Fiction Treasures series. In her 1901 novel *The Nighthawk*, Alice Jones shows us a man who discovers his

As a theory of physical anthropology, race suffers fatal flaws. Race presumes substantial phenotypic and genotypic commonality within each group and sharp discontinuity between groups. The observable differences within each putative race, however, always turn out to be as great as those between them, and members of one race will be found to have traits that ought to characterize another race. Human variation simply does not occur in the way that a theory of race must presuppose.

Insofar as it is preoccupied with heritable traits that have their basis in human biology, race is not quite the same thing as ethnicity. Ethnicity defines groups on the basis of their common language, religion, aesthetics, customs, mores, and folkways. It is true, though, that the meanings of the two words have always been close. When early modern Europeans said that in England a race of Normans had conquered a race of Anglo-Saxons, or that in France a race of Franks had conquered a race of Gauls, they layered what we would call ethnicity over what we would call race: “the Normans” were said to differ from “the Anglo-Saxons” on the basis of bloodlines, yes, but also language, worldview, and value-systems. Nevertheless, there is a difference. In the concise formula of Paul Taylor, “‘Race’ points to the body, while ‘ethnicity’ points to culture.” According to race, but not ethnicity, the defining characteristics of human subgroups inhere directly within the flesh and the blood. The balance of this essay will explore what this can mean. See Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 54.

⁶ Frederick William Wallace, *Captain Salvation*, introduction by M. Brook Taylor (1925; Halifax: Formac, 2005), 5, 45-6 (emphasis in original). M. Brook Taylor remarks that Anchorville seems like a stand-in for Digby, NS. If that is so, then perhaps “Appletown Theological College” may be a fictionalized Acadia University (still “Acadia College” in 1875). Acadia lies up the Bay of Fundy from Digby, just as Appletown is meant to be up the Fundy Shore from Anchorville. While it is true that Wallace represents Appletown Theological College as a Presbyterian institution

ancestral self at sea. Short, squat Captain Arthur might not have cut much of a figure in Halifax high society, but when he captained a sailing ship through a squall anyone could see that “‘truly he came of the Blood,’ the Norsemen’s breed, whose fullest life is breathed in the air of strife.”⁷ Similarly, Frank Parker Day’s reluctant hero Alex Macdonald fled pious Pictou Academy and his family of dourly Presbyterian Cape Breton Scots because the “strains” of his character “hark[ed] back to some MacDonald of the clans who had fought, raped, pillaged, and drunk to the fulfillment of his heart’s desire.” When we come upon Alex in Day’s *River of Strangers* (1926), he has gone west to the wilds of northern Manitoba to work at a fur-trading post of the New World Company in order to find surroundings where his inborn character makes sense.⁸ Such tropes were so commonplace that Theodore Goodridge Roberts could gently satirize them in the whodunit *Nell Harley* (1912), when his husky American millionaire Harvey P. Banks finds himself transformed by a fight in backwoods New Brunswick as “the passions of fur-clad, pit-dwelling ancestors flamed within him.”⁹ A theme of situational racial emergence, as the deep truth of one’s ancestry breaks forth almost in spite of oneself, runs through the fiction of this period.

When this generation of authors told stories, they often forthrightly accorded racial characteristics a centrality that seems hard to ignore but equally hard to characterize. The publisher of Alice Jones’s romantic novel *Bubbles We Buy* (1903) proudly advertised “Miss Jones has founded her novel on the law of heredity.”¹⁰ Indeed, the resolution of the plot depends upon the fact that her hero, Gilbert, has inherited only white blood while his cousin Margaret has also inherited African blood, the taint of which accounts for her wickedness; Gilbert is advised: “You may thank the Lord that there’s no drop in your veins of the blood of that old woman they buried to-day . . . because it’s the snake’s blood of a brown Martinique girl, and if you’ve never heard what that means, you’ve never sailed about the West Indies as I

whereas Acadia would have been avowedly Baptist, nonetheless the theological seminary was the focal point of each community. The 19th-century Acadia theological seminary certainly would have extended no more tolerance to drunken brawlers than Appletown Theological Seminary did in Wallace’s novel. “Appletown,” meanwhile, seems a reasonable analogue for Wolfville, the Annapolis Valley home of Acadia situated in an area conspicuous for its apple orchards.

- 7 Alice Jones, *The Nighthawk*, introduction by Greg Marquis (1901; Halifax: Formac, 2001), 286.
- 8 Frank Parker Day, *River of Strangers*, introduction by Alan Wilson (1926; Halifax: Formac, 2009), 8. Alan Wilson quite sensibly suggests that Day’s fictional New World Company is a lightly disguised version of the real-life Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC). The name “New World Company,” however, would seem to recall the historical “North West Company” that merged with the HBC in 1821. Not only do the initials NWC seem significant, but Day has the New World Company headquartered in Montreal like the North West Company but unlike the London-based HBC.
- 9 Theodore Goodridge Roberts, *Nell Harley: A Backwoods Mystery*, introduction by Valerie M. Latus (1912; Halifax: Formac, 2003), 295. The novel initially appeared in 1912 under the title *Rayton: A Backwoods Mystery*.
- 10 Advertisement reproduced in Alice Jones, *Gabriel Praed’s Castle*, introduction by Mora Dianne O’Neill (1904; Halifax: Formac, 2009), unpaginated back matter. Jones’s almost obsessive racism stands out for its sustained intensity, even among the race-conscious cadre of authors represented in the Formac series; but then again, her work also found large audiences of eager readers.

have, when my husband was master of a fine Lunenburg schooner.”¹¹ However, in the new Formac edition to this book, now retitled *A Privateer’s Fortune*, Dan Conlin’s introductory essay concentrates on the historical antecedents for one character, the privateer Bauer – who never appears directly after the first chapter – and demotes the once-imposing “law of heredity” to a side-issue (“there are also ugly racial associations typical of the time”).¹² Conlin grapples with a problem common to many of the editors in this series. To call attention to the racial themes in these novels might discredit them in the present day, much like the grand social-evolutionary narratives that seemed so authoritative a century ago but that have lost most of their intellectual respectability while retaining a potent cultural charge. As Alan Wilson warns us à propos of Frank Parker Day, we “modern readers” may find it “jarring” to hear an author speak so “insensitively” of anyone non-white.¹³ It is difficult to honestly acknowledge “ugly racial associations typical of the time” without seeming to condemn the novelists. Faced with the “rather harsh” portrait of Aboriginal people that the otherwise humane and sensitive Evelyn Eaton paints throughout *Quietly My Captain Waits* (1940), Barry Moody pre-empts charges of racism on the grounds that, later in life, she would “come to identify with this element of North American society” – which she acclaimed as “noble and virtuous.”¹⁴ Thus we may safely consign Eaton’s “rather harsh” words – Mme de Freneuse considers the Iroquois to be the “filthiest and most cruel of all the Indian tribes . . . Their faces were bestial and stupid. Worst of all, they began to cast lustful glances at her” – to the margins of the novel as something that she did not really mean and only said because of the times. We can, therefore, enjoy the novel untroubled by such ugly recrudescence from the antipodes of our cultural memory.¹⁵

Upon closer examination, however, Eaton’s handling of Aboriginal characters turns out to be deeply personal and surprising. It is much more, for example, than a byproduct of writing about early modern European characters. The racist sentiments in her historical novels cannot be normalized as merely the accurate if bracing depiction of the psychology of the past. The “Author’s Note” to *Restless Are the Sails* features Eaton unselfconsciously referring to the Mi’kmaq as “savages” using her own voice in direct address. Yet she seems to oscillate wildly between sympathy and antipathy. So do her characters. In general, her white protagonists denigrate Aboriginal people except in those situations when they actually begin to conflate themselves with the “savages.” *Restless Are the Sails* features an interracial marriage uniting our French hero Paul to the Mi’kmaq woman San after a tempest shipwrecks him on 18th-century Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) and she rescues him. At first,

11 Alice Jones, *A Privateer’s Fortune*, introduction by Dan Conlin (1903; Halifax: Formac, 2002), 406. These words are spoken by the character of Ellen Seivert.

12 Dan Conlin, “Introduction” to Alice Jones, *A Privateer’s Fortune*, 12.

13 Wilson, “Introduction” to Day, *River of Strangers*, xii. Taylor takes almost the same tack with Frederick William Wallace, briskly informing us “As with most popular fiction of its day, *Captain Salvation* offends against modern sensibilities with regard to ethnicity and gender.” See Taylor, “Introduction” to Wallace, *Captain Salvation*, xiv. Notice how these editorial statements put the stress on the content of our “sensibilities” rather than on the content of what the novelists wrote.

14 Barry M. Moody, “Introduction” to Evelyn Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits* (1940; Halifax: Formac, 2001), vii.

15 Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 344.

Paul blanches at the thought of an Aboriginal wife. Even though the nuns who raised San had taught her to speak elegant French, “coming from a savage in the forest it was inexplicable, grotesque.” Paul does feel a red-blooded appreciation for her “exciting body,” but marries San only because the imposing black-robed Abbé Le Loutre and his Aboriginal followers coerce him. Then, one night, Paul really does fall in love with her. At that magical moment, “in the soft light all traces of her savage ancestry seemed to disappear. Her hair was tousled out of its sleek straight braids . . . she looked like any tired French child, like Marie his sister, or Margaret who had loved him – this child loved him too She was his and he would not leave her.”¹⁶ In order to love San as he could a white woman, Paul must actually transpose whiteness onto her. Such an inspired vision, however, depends entirely upon Paul rather than San herself. It must inevitably dissipate after the soft light of dusk yields to the cold light of day. Indeed, Paul will soon discover that his true love is white – Anne, the beautiful daughter of the governor of Louisbourg. Yet the duty-bound Paul must honour his vows to San and suffer manfully as Anne returns to France without him after the British/New England conquest of Louisbourg in 1745. In the wake of this intertwined national and personal disaster, Paul captains a pirate ship with an Aboriginal crew around the Nova Scotia coast, with San and their son Tom aboard. Paul tries to love San, but manages to do so only in a condescending, paternalistic fashion that pales in comparison to his grand passion for Anne. He cannot love her as a wife but only as an endearing pet, rather like “a favorite dog.”¹⁷

San’s sublime but momentary ascent to whiteness seems very long ago by then. Instead, her sheer alien Aboriginality preys upon Paul’s mind until he succumbs to the odious but inevitable comparison of San with the real white maiden Anne. He finally has to admit “the impulses and intuitions [San] obeyed were hers alone, shared with her people. He did not understand them though he had mastered her. She was a squaw, always crouching at a man’s feet, crooning to comfort him, not an equal like Anne.”¹⁸ San’s impenetrable Mi’kmaw otherness extends to their biracial son Tom, as Paul cannot see himself in his child. In a scene that reverses the mirage of whiteness that briefly transfigured San 200 pages earlier, Paul experiences uncanny alienation one night as he gazes upon his son. The mysterious interplay of light and dark again proves decisive as “the swinging light of the safety lantern cast shadows and lines across [Tom’s] face, so that he seemed all Indian, not even a child, but a Malisite chief. Paul watched him for a moment, disconcerted. This was not his little son.”¹⁹ On the very next page, a terrifying storm sinks the ship, drowning San and Tom but sparing Paul. The fathomless ocean had once given Paul to San when a

16 Evelyn Eaton, *Restless Are the Sails*, introduction by A.J.B. Johnston (1941; Halifax: Formac, 2003), unpaginated front matter, 63, 93.

17 “She was sitting on a bearskin at his feet with her arms on his knees. From time to time she rested her cheek against them. From time to time he patted her head absentmindedly and kindly as he might have patted the head of a favorite dog.” See Eaton, *Restless Are the Sails*, 284.

18 Eaton, *Restless Are the Sails*, 294. Anne remains almost a blank slate even at the end of the book. We know that she is kind-hearted and amorous, but it seems difficult to understand how she could arouse such overpowering feelings in Paul. Such questions are almost beside the point within the novel, however, as Eaton really requires her only as an aspirational token of social advancement and white womanhood.

19 Eaton, *Restless Are the Sails*, 297.

storm washed him onto Cape Breton Island; now the same ocean has delivered him from her – not only fulfilling Paul’s unspeakable but insistent wish to be rid of his non-white wife and imperfectly white child, but doing so in a way that leaves him blameless. Now free, Paul soon makes his way to France where he finds Anne awaiting him.

In his introduction to the new edition of *Restless Are the Sails*, A.J.B. Johnston reflects at some length upon how Eaton writes Aboriginal characters. On the one hand, Johnston gestures magnanimously toward historical context. He explains that nothing Eaton wrote seems out of keeping with the cultural politics of any historical moment before perhaps the 1970s; indeed, Johnston observes that San seems quite comparable to the sort of Aboriginal character who might have appeared in a novel by Thomas Raddall, the preeminent Maritime writer of the day. “We know it today as racism,” he concludes, “but it was around for centuries before it was regarded as what it really is.”²⁰ This statement takes perhaps a step too far. Johnston is quite right to note the similarity with Raddall, but, with all due respect to historical context, Eaton has gone well out of her way to insist on a racial dimension to human relationships – even to the extent of implying an underlying stratum of racial reality that shapes our inmost core of being. It would seem like an aridly semantic exercise to decide whether this precisely qualifies the novel as racist or if some more historically attuned category should apply to books written in the 1940s. Suffice it to say that Eaton posits an unbridgeable divide between white and non-white, European and Aboriginal, and it is this underlying, racialized division within reality that explains the forces that push her characters to act, as well as the affinities that alternately draw them together and push them apart.

Yet this statement by Johnston suggests something important. Merely to adduce the presence or absence of racial themes in a novel is to say very little about what the category of race is trying to express in context. This question becomes all the more pressing if we deny that race has an independent metaphysical reality – to insist instead that it is a matter of social practice and cultural encoding that is only precariously correlated to phenotype. In this situation, race would have no existence apart from the terms that codify it and thus would take on subtly different forms in the expressions of different actors (even within the same milieu).²¹ And race means something slightly different in *Restless Are the Sails* than it would in a novel written

20 A.J.B. Johnston, “Introduction” to *Restless Are the Sails*, xiv.

21 I have in mind the seminal distinction that Norbert Elias drew between the fungible concepts of “culture” and “civilization,” on the one hand, and the invariant concept of a “triangle,” on the other. The meaning of mathematical concepts such as “triangle” remains constant across different contexts: a shape (polygon) must be a triangle if and only if it has three sides and three vertices. But the meaning of “culture” or “civilization” is radically context-dependent to the extent that Elias’s English translators frequently keep the words in his native German, as *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, since they carry measurably different connotations in either language. There is a social history embedded in the very definition of culture or civilization in a way that does not apply to the definition of a triangle. Every invocation of culture or civilization becomes another event – whether great or small – in that ongoing history. Race, I would suggest, can usefully be approached in this context-dependent manner. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. ed., trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 8.

by Johnston's reference point Thomas Raddall, even though Raddall was an Anglo-Nova Scotian of the same generation as Eaton (less than a year separates their respective births in 1903 and 1902) who gravitated to the same genre of historical fiction.²² Indeed, he too would write a novel of Louisbourg, *Roger Sudden*, just three years later in 1944. Raddall's book also features an interracial romantic encounter in the Nova Scotia woodlands, this time between our English hero Roger and the beguiling Mi'kmaw woman Wapke. As with the character of San in *Restless Are the Sails*, Wapke undergoes a kind of transformation one night as she approaches Roger – a transformation being of course necessary to surmount the racial chasm between them. Yet there is a fundamental difference. Whereas Eaton has San become momentarily white, her racial otherness temporarily suspended, Raddall has Wapke become a “bronze pixie,” her biological difference still clearly in view. Thus at the last moment Roger can save himself from misalliance as he realizes “to mate with this wild thing [Wapke], to produce hybrid things, half beast and half himself, and to live year in year out among these mockeries, like a man shut up in a room hung with distorted mirrors . . . ugh! Darkness! Darkness!”²³ Roger's last-minute epiphany saves him from the fate of his counterpart Paul in Eaton's novel, who fathers a mixed-race son in whom he cannot recognize himself. Raddall's larger point, in fact, is that Englishmen such as Roger practiced a kind of racial continence by abjuring intermarriage with Aboriginal people whereas the French yielded to this temptation.²⁴ Accordingly, miscegenation doomed New France to defeat by the British and, going forward, the tainted French Canadians would never quite become the equals of their English neighbours. Without pausing to evaluate these propositions, it may nonetheless be said that Raddall's chief interest when writing such racially saturated passages lies in social evolution – the fateful influence that he saw racial dynamics exerting upon the course of human history.

Eaton does not really share Raddall's interest in social evolution, even though she invokes many of the same racial themes. Instead, she focuses on recognition. Can Paul see himself in San and their son Tom? Or can he only see himself in the racially identical Anne? What is the true nature of these characters? These questions become particularly acute, though no easier to answer, in light of Eaton's own racial journey. Just when we cannot quite say, but as she entered middle age Evelyn Eaton became convinced that she – like her character Tom – had not only white but also Aboriginal ancestry.²⁵ The details seem vague. Puzzling through them, Johnston simply cannot determine whether Eaton believed herself of Mi'kmaw or of Maliseet descent – or,

22 Eaton's family roots were in Saint John, NB, and she would spend much of her youth in England; but she lived in Nova Scotia when she wrote all three of her novels represented in the Formac series.

23 Thomas H. Raddall, *Roger Sudden* (1944; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), 166. The implications of the encounter between Roger and Wapke are explored at greater length in Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 221-4.

24 At the climactic scene of the novel, Roger reflects: “Only a handful of *coureurs de bois* and priests had ever penetrated the continent – and the *coureurs* had mated with savage women and spilled their seed in the wilderness . . . They had not left a mark.” See Raddall, *Roger Sudden*, 357.

25 Valerie Latus discusses this aspect of Eaton's life in her “Introduction” to Eaton, *The Sea Is So Wide* (1943; Halifax: Formac, 2002).

really, how (“which group, and on which side of the family, is unknown”).²⁶ Her almost disdainful portrayal of peoples whom she did or soon would consider her forebears moves a perplexed Johnston to ask: “Did she know then that she had an aboriginal ancestor” – if indeed she did – “and simply ignore and suppress this detail? Was she simply going along with the stereotypes of the period, which required that the Native characters show deference to white men and women?”²⁷ We may never know. Yet the importance of gaze and perception in *Restless Are the Sails* takes on a new dimension now. Eaton, on the verge of a quest for her true identity that would last for the rest of her life, shows the faces of San and Tom changing in the play of light and shadow under Paul’s transfixed gaze. One moment they seem European, the next they seem Aboriginal; they seem startlingly familiar, then shockingly alien. As Peter Brooks has said, “We are led to believe – perhaps we do believe – that meaning lies deep within a veiled private realm, and that the most private part of that realm is simply the human body.”²⁸ The scenes of sudden racial emergence from the Maritime literature of another generation might be reinterpreted as so many moments when the private realm of meaning veiled within the body,

26 Johnston, “Introduction” to *Restless Are the Sails*, xiv. Latus indicates that Eaton thought she had Mi’kmaq ancestry through her father’s family, but Eaton does not appear to have said anything conclusive on the specific factual details or genealogical evidence. Moreover, the distinction between Mi’kmaq and Maliseet may not have mattered that much to Eaton. Her most formative experiences of Aboriginal people, culture, and religion would occur in the United States while she lived in Nevada. Furthermore, throughout her three novels represented in the Formac series, Eaton tends to use the names “Micmac” and “Malisite” interchangeably as equivalent terms for Aboriginality. Eaton seems not to have dwelt upon the differences between Aboriginal peoples, instead assimilating them to one internally homogeneous category that she could contrast with white Europeans more easily and sharply (the one exception would be the Iroquois, who tend to be viewed as bloodthirsty killers through the eyes of her French main characters). More generally, as Barry Moody points out in his essay, Eaton’s portrayal of Aboriginal life in Nova Scotia shows little ethnographic specificity; *Quietly My Captain Waits*, a book for whose historical accuracy Eaton made proud claims, features Mi’kmaq who live in teepees, wear buffalo skins, and enact “Dakota” and “Pawnee” rituals. As these latter two ethnonyms would indicate, Eaton has almost fashioned her Mi’kmaq (or are they Maliseet?) characters on the template of Plains Indians – who were, and indeed are, much more prominent in Anglo-American popular culture. They sometimes seem like generic redskins who have wandered into the novel from the Hollywood movies about the Wild West that thrilled audiences during the 1940s. The imprecision in Eaton’s portrayal of the Mi’kmaq and Maliseet offers a startling contrast with her careful archival research on the French of Port Royal, which, to quote Moody, lends “richness and depth” to the most distinguished passages in the novel. See Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 96, 111-13, vi.

27 Johnston, “Introduction” to *Restless Are the Sails*, xiv. There is also another important question, which cannot be adequately addressed here but which should at least be posed. Is biological descent the only or the best way to determine either Aboriginal identity or membership within an Aboriginal people? Certainly to claim politico-legal status as an Indian involves many considerations of blood quantum, as it does for a number of bands such as the Kahnawake Mohawks. On the other hand, David Eugene Wilkins (Lumbee) says “for us it was always about allegiance rather than biology or ancestry” while David Treuer (Ojibwe) makes self-identification into a kind of performative speech act: “An Indian identity is something someone claims for oneself; it is a matter of choice.” In other words, biological descent is not the only possible model for constructing a Native American identity – even though it appears to have been decisive for Eaton’s sense of herself.

28 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 48.

obscured even from ourselves, bursts into the open. Eaton's scenes in *Restless Are the Sails* carry a special resonance because, whereas those of a Thomas Raddall, Frederick William Wallace or Alice Jones seem muscular and emphatic, each such moment in Eaton's work seems fragile and elusive.

Returning to Barry Moody's observation quoted above, it is probably significant that Eaton's apparent change of heart with regard to Aboriginal people coincided with her growing conviction that she had Indian blood; if they were "noble and virtuous," then she was as well. Like her white protagonists, for Eaton to fully respect Aboriginal people would mean eliminating the difference between her and them. The heroine of *Quietly My Captain Waits*, Madame de Freneuse, initially regards the "savages" with fear after they kill her son ("Stupid, brutal animals. Not men. Grinning devils in the dark").²⁹ But a visit to France, the homeland she has never seen, leaves her alienated and baffled by what strikes her as the arbitrary and venal social order of the Old Regime. The "savages" of the New World begin to rise in her esteem, almost attaining the status of an 18th-century ideal type – the noble savage who has virtuously kept well away from a decadent civilization that has corrupted the original nature of mankind.³⁰ The softening of her attitude is clinched after the English conquer her Port Royal home. In the aftermath of this disaster, a burly redcoat whips Freneuse's aboriginal servant Dahinda. When the stricken Freneuse protests, the implacable Englishman replies: "It's only an Indian. They don't feel pain like you and I." Yet the callous soldier actually convinces Freneuse that the opposite is true: she identifies with Dahinda's suffering and feels revulsion at the Englishman's unthinking brutality. Within just a few pages, Freneuse has voyaged into the wilderness to live among the Mi'kmaq as a "medicine woman" (a position she attains with surprising ease, it must be said).³¹ Freneuse's about-face is all the more fascinating because she acts as a kind of alter ego for Eaton. Even the physical description of the heroine bears more than a passing resemblance to the author photo: "What was the fascination of her face, not even pretty, with its peculiar nose, odd lips, outthrust and determined chin? – but beautiful, intelligent, amused dark eyes?"³² Years before Eaton would do so in the American Southwest, her character of Madame de Freneuse journeyed into Native American spirituality as a reaction to a European world from which she felt increasingly alienated. Through the agency of Freneuse, Eaton combined all of her complicated feelings about Aboriginal peoples and European civilization to imagine a possible future into which she would later step.

29 Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 147.

30 As she gazes upon Notre Dame de Paris, Freneuse has a reverie that recalls Michel de Montaigne's famous 16th-century essay "Of Cannibals": "She wondered how the Cathedral [Notre-Dame] and the prison could so front each other and not raise questions in men's minds. For a moment, as she shuddered, the tortures of the savages beneath wide skies seemed cleaner, less degrading, than the King's paid executioners." See Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 302.

31 Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 345, 350. Yet if her attitude to the Mi'kmaq is no longer contemptuous, it remains condescending: "For they were lighthearted children with little sympathy for things they did not understand" (351). *Quietly My Captain Waits* is not *Dances with Wolves*.

32 Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*, 47.

This discussion of Eaton's novels only scratches the surface. To give only one example, all of the themes considered here would benefit immeasurably from a developed comparison with her later work – after she had adopted her new persona as something like an American Indian. What I want to suggest is that race serves Eaton as a crucial category for making her work mean what it means. Perhaps there is a tendency to presume that race and meaning are mutually exclusive categories. To the extent that a work appears racist, it is meaningless – or, rather, its meaning instantly reduces to so many reiterations of “racist.” Such a position is perfectly understandable because race as an analytical category tends to produce false judgements about social reality, and racism has morally noxious consequences we rightly reject. Seeking to protect the literature of the past from the dismissive condescension of the present, it is a natural reaction to try to minimize the extent to which race underpins its meaning. But it is worth asking whether such a strategy of selective reading actually leaves the meaning of the work intact. In many of these novels, in fact, race is not the opposite of meaning but is vitally constitutive of it. As St. Augustine said long ago, the whole of a psalm is present in each of its lines. In a work of art, to remove any element immediately changes the meaning of the whole and makes the meaning of the remaining parts impossible to recover. This point will become clearer upon examining another novel, Margaret Marshall Saunders's *Rose of Acadia*.

Gwendolyn Davies, faced with the racial fantasies that periodically preoccupy Margaret Marshall Saunders in her *Rose of Acadia* (1898), dismisses them as something that somehow “crept into” the novel and are not, presumably, essential to its meaning. One must admit that it is tempting to adopt a strategy of selective reading when faced with a book like *Rose of Acadia*, which Davies clearly identifies as “problematic.” Here is a Victorian novel whose second act presents us with a “vital and memorable” heroine in Bidiane LeNoir, an increasingly articulate young woman who successfully participates in an election campaign, spurs her Acadian community in Nova Scotia to take control of its destiny, and boldly rides a bicycle despite local opposition to a newfangled practice that causes women to publicly display their ankles. *Rose of Acadia*, as such, vividly shows us the “new woman” of the 1890s in the rural Acadian Maritimes, a locale where we might not expect to find her.³³ Davies wants to accentuate this aspect of the novel, even as she struggles with its racism. Certainly I – like Davies, and probably most 21st-century Canadian readers – find incipient Victorian feminism a more attractive heritage than flrid Victorian racial hierarchy. Yet, at the same time, Saunders's positions on race function as a powerful set of assumptions about human beings, assumptions that have not simply “crept into” the novel as though from the outside and by mistake but are vitally constitutive of its meaning. They pertain to the new woman Bidiane as much as to anything else.

As she scrutinizes the Acadians of Clare, Saunders finds shining examples to celebrate. Bidiane and her older cousin, the titular Rose of Acadia – the “modern Evangeline” whose romantic Victorian femininity perfectly complements the

33 Gwendolyn Davies, “Introduction” to Margaret Marshall Saunders, *Rose of Acadia* (1898; Halifax: Formac, 2002), unpaginated front matter.

progressive Bidiane – do particular credit to their community. Then there are certain less praiseworthy Acadians, chief among them Mirabelle Marie Watercrow – the slovenly aunt who has raised Bidiane since the death of the girl’s parents. Passage after passage of the novel unflatteringly contrasts the radiant Bidiane and beautiful Rose with the gross Mirabelle Marie. Whereas the interesting Bidiane is “charged with magic,” and the pure Rose is “a rose of dawn,” Mirabelle Marie resembles “an enormous toad.” How could this toad-woman bear any relation to her lovely cousins? After all, Saunders’s Acadians stand out for their impeccable pedigree. Rose proclaims “It was the best blood of France that settled Acadie.”³⁴ They are a noble breed. However, Mirabelle Marie does not fully partake of this distinguished blood for the reason that she has Aboriginal ancestry (this in an era when allegations of miscegenation routinely implied that Acadians were genetically inferior to their Anglo-Saxon neighbours).³⁵ Yes, the benighted Mirabelle Marie’s grandmother had been a “squaw” – “and Bidiane, as a highly civilized being, winced slightly at it. Very little of the Indian strain had entered her [i.e., Bidiane’s] veins, except a few drops that were exhibited in a passion for rambling in the woods. She was more like her French ancestors, but her aunt had the lazy, careless blood, as had also her children.”³⁶ Bidiane labours mightily to improve the mind and character of her ignorant, irreligious, and feckless aunt, but must frankly acknowledge the racial barriers to such a civilizing process.

In his now-classic *Faces of Degeneration*, the historian Daniel Pick notes that a certain kind of novel written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries would use grotesque descriptions of the physical bodies of degenerates “pessimistically and conservatively to signify the inherent physical or rather physiological obstacles to social mobility.”³⁷ Although she is a bumptious character usually played for laughs, Mirabelle Marie nonetheless fits this pattern. Her diffusely obscene physicality embodies all the long years of neglect, isolation, and degradation that the “new woman” Bidiane will need to overcome in order to exalt her Acadian people to an equal place in the family of white races. Degeneration haunted the Victorian mind as the shadow-side of evolution, a kind of paranoid inversion of the process of natural selection that Charles Darwin had described in *The Origin of Species* (1859).

34 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 129, 315, 327, 324, 179.

35 Perhaps the most virulent example in all Maritime literature occurs in Raddall’s “Reunion at Grand Pré.” At the climax of this 1945 short story, the romantic figure of Gabriel (the male love interest in the 1847 poem *Evangeline*, Longfellow’s blockbuster versification of the Expulsion of the Acadians) is shockingly transformed into a dirty old “squaw-man” who was “like an ape, so bent at the knees and shoulders, and his arms so long, with big gnarled hands” – traits that Raddall’s mouthpiece George Fortin directly relates to the baleful consequences of race-mixing. Within the economy of the story, moreover, this vivid reassertion of atavistic genetic characteristics consequent upon generations of interracial marriage nullifies Acadian claims to recognition in the present as it makes a mockery of the character Evangeline Trusdell’s search for her Acadian roots. See Thomas Raddall, “Reunion at Grand Pré,” in *Tambour and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1945), 115-17.

36 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 374.

37 Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 162. Pick is referring specifically to the social novels of George Gissing.

On the edges of modern society, whether through the brutalization caused by proletarian labour or through interbreeding with inferior races (processes by no means considered mutually exclusive), could certain people be regressing to a debased animal state? The dread specter of degeneration loomed over novelists across the North Atlantic world, whether Joseph Conrad in England (*Heart of Darkness*), Jack London in the United States (*The Sea-Wolf*), or Thomas Raddall in Atlantic Canada (*Roger Sudden* in his historical mode, *Tidefall* in modern dress).³⁸

Degeneration also marks certain volumes of the Formac Fiction Treasures series. In his introduction to Alice Jones's pro-Confederate historical romance *The Nighthawk*, Greg Marquis remarks upon "the widespread Victorian fear of racial mingling and degeneration" that regulates the author's depiction of mulatto slaves in the South as inherently more dangerous than black slaves or white slave-owners.³⁹ Jones, in fact, flatly states the dangers herself in *A Privateer's Fortune*: "There are hidden fires there . . . warring hereditary traits of alien races that change the character as one side or the other gets uppermost."⁴⁰ Her dictum might also apply to *Rose of Acadia*, for it is indeed "racial mingling" that most exercises Saunders. The problem with Mirabelle Marie is precisely that she has "the Indian strain," not that she actually *is* an Indian. When we do meet a full-fledged Indian in his woodland home, Saunders treats him with measured respect. She endows him with the good sense to distrust Mirabelle Marie and even pronounces him "more civilized" than the fat Acadienne, despite the latter's white blood.⁴¹ Within the novel, Mirabelle Marie embodies hybridity in an imagined cosmos where purity stands out as the highest ideal. Her hybridity extends past racial interbreeding to encompass cultural deracination. Although her family's surname should be "Corbineau," she has convinced her pliant husband to Anglicize it to "Watercrow" in one of her misbegotten attempts at fitting into an Anglophone social order – attempts crowned by her journey to find work in Boston, a move that Saunders portrays not so much as an economic decision but more as the logical outcome of a pre-existing acculturated debasement. Dialogue clinches the point. Saunders condemns Mirabelle Marie to babble in a wretched pidgin, whereas the true Acadians speak in a rather improbably elevated register. Their tongue, we are assured, is the chivalric speech of gallant knights and courtly demoiselles from the chateaux of the High

38 Thomas H. Raddall, *Tidefall* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953); Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness [1899]," in *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1903), 49-182; Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf* (London: Macmillan, 1904); Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: J. Murray, 1859). London's book also appears to have had no little influence upon Wallace's *Captain Salvation* – same hard-edged antihero, same view of seafaring as a kind of evolutionary testing ground, same allusions to Nietzsche.

39 Greg Marquis, "Introduction" to Jones, *Nighthawk*, 15.

40 Jones, *A Privateer's Fortune*, 239. Jones advances this proposition through her Gilbert Clinch, who uses his knowledge of this essential racial truth to solve all of the significant mysteries that trouble the characters in this novel.

41 Saunders calls him "the more civilized being" in comparison to Mirabelle Marie and her equally contemptible cousin Nannichette (though he does suffer the indignity of being Nannichette's husband). See the chapter "Ghosts by Sleeping Water" in Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 386-403.

Middle Ages.⁴² Then there is Mirabelle Marie: “The fat woman had sunk exhausted on the doorstep of the yellow house: ‘Nannichette, I be dèche if I go a step further, till you gimme checque chouse pour mouiller la langue’” (give me something to wet my tongue).⁴³ Bidiane’s journey throughout the novel is to rise above Mirabelle Marie, reclaiming her true inborn nature as a pure, unadulterated Acadian.

Trying to account for the presence of Mirabelle Marie and her very similar cousin Nannichette (“almost as fat and easy-going”) in a novel whose other Acadian protagonists seem like paragons of nobility, Davies suggests that Saunders included such “caricatures” out of a need to cater to “North America’s literary taste for ‘local colour’.”⁴⁴ Saunders no doubt felt the pressures of the literary marketplace, especially since she – in common with all of the authors in the Formac series – needed to find publishers outside the Atlantic region (in this case Boston). Nevertheless, Davies may understate the extent to which Saunders’s own worldview might readily generate such caricatures. In fact, strange as it may seem, Saunders’s imagined world would lose its dramatic plausibility without its grotesques. Early in the novel, Rose of Acadia makes proud claims about her people in response to her Bostonian guest Vesper Nimmo:

“Really, – then you have never seen a drunken man?”

“I never see a drunken man,” rejoined his pretty hostess.

“Then I suppose there are no fights.”

“There are no fights among Acadiens. They are good people. They go to mass and vespers on Sunday. They listen to their good priests. In the evening one amuses oneself, and on Monday we rise early to work. There are no dances, no fights.”

What Rose says, of course, could have no factual basis for any community composed of mere mortals. Later, she must admit to Vesper that she spoke as she did only because she did not want him to look down on her people. Yet, despite factual inaccuracy, Rose has articulated the standard to which all of the key Acadian characters – Rose, Bidiane, and their cousin Agapit – must measure up. Each behaves with unimpeachable nobility. Even their faults seem more like the sufferings of beautiful souls in a wicked and uncomprehending world. Such are the true Acadians. If there is vulgarity, greed, and squalid ordinariness, it belongs to the Mirabelle Maries of the community – the ones who skip church, who speak English half the time, and who may have impure blood. Saunders’s Acadians know this: “Agapit, though an ardent Acadian, and one bent on advancing the interests of his countrymen in every way, had yet little patience with the class to which Mirabelle Marie belonged.” The caricatures incarnate those vile and fleshly aspects of the human condition that Saunders has purified out of the true Acadians. At a crucial

42 Rose’s cousin, Agapit, asks if she has said too much to an American visitor: “Thou didst not tell him of thy wish to educate thy boy, of thy two hundred dollars in the bank, of thy husband, who teased thy stepmother till she married thee to him, nor of me, for example?” See Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 70.

43 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 389.

44 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 378; Davies, “Introduction” to Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, front matter.

moment in the novel, Rose of Acadia appears before us “pale, trembling in a beauty from which everything earthly and material seemed to have been purged away.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, Saunders constantly reminds us of the fleshy fatness of Mirabelle Marie, which the novelist finds alternately amusing and disgusting. Mirabelle Marie is the repository of everything that Rose has transcended. To pick up the thread of Pick’s argument, in the work of certain late Victorian authors “the unconscious is hinted at occurring only at the level of the body and its discontents.”⁴⁶ The presence of the “caricature” Acadians in the novel amounts to the return of the repressed.

The noble and elevated souls among the Acadians actually find it easier to relate to the similarly noble American, Vesper Nimmo. His ancestors helped to carry out the Expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755, but after some initial misgivings Agapit and Rose befriend him. After all, the good Acadians never really had a problem with the likes of Vesper. Agapit expatiates: “My quarrel is not with the great-minded, the eagerly anxious-for-peace Englishmen in years gone by, who reinforced the kings and queens of England. No, – I impeach the low-born upstarts and their colonial accomplices. Do you know, can you imagine, the diabolical scheme of the expulsion of the Acadians was conceived by a barber, and carried into decapitation by a house painter?” Vesper is nothing like these “low-born upstarts.” Having come to Nova Scotia with the express purpose of atoning for the sins of his fathers, Vesper shows himself to be “a knight of the Middle Ages.”⁴⁷ It will be the chivalrous Vesper who seeks out Bidiane because his ancestors had wronged hers during the Expulsion. He instantly sees the real Bidiane beneath her crudely Anglicized exterior, whereupon he whisks the girl away to Paris so that she can reconnect with her innate Frenchness and ultimately return home to help her fellow Acadians do the same.⁴⁸ Redeeming history, Vesper teaches Bidiane that the valuable parts of Acadian culture are timelessly European. As she beholds Rose, Bidiane sighs to Agapit, “She is like those lovely Flemish women, who are so tall, and graceful, and simple, and elegant, and whose heads are like burnished gold. I wish you could see them, Agapit. Mr. Nimmo says they have preserved intact the admirable *naïveté* of the women of the Middle Ages.” Rose, in turn, can see the true Vesper: “You say that I am like a princess. Ah, not so much as you. You are altogether like a prince. You had the air of being contented; I did not know your thoughts. Now I can look into your beautiful white soul.”⁴⁹ Their reciprocal spiritual recognition supplies a model for the readers of this novel to emulate. *Rose of Acadia* creates a space for the noble English-speaking reader to meet the noble Acadians in order to celebrate their shared pedigree of aestheticized whiteness and birthright of European high culture. The racial hierarchy within the novel is articulated in the

45 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 63, 151, 400, 483.

46 Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 166. Pick refers specifically to Robert Louis Stevenson.

47 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 113, 25.

48 After she has returned from her pilgrimage to France, Bidiane crusades against the “corrupted” French spoken by many of the benighted Acadians. Why must they say *p’tit* for *petit*, or *ces jeunes ladies* for *ces jeunes demoiselles*, or *becker* for *baiser*? “It is so vulgar!” she exclaims. The value of this book for Acadian pride must be significantly qualified by the fact that Saunders recommends that they orient themselves to Paris; all that has happened in the New World is a corruption to be corrected. See Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 477.

49 Saunders, *Rose of Acadia*, 477 (emphasis in original), 218.

service of this purpose, such that the text could no longer perform its function if the racism were pushed to one side.

Such scenes from *Rose of Acadia* also establish a relationship between the past and the present. To the untrained eye, Vesper Nimmo appears to be a cosmopolitan modern man; but, in a spiritual sense, he is really a prince or knight. He and Rose both have a medieval essence in a 19th-century social world. Alice Jones has her characters live out a similarly complex temporality in *The Nighthawk*. Though her two love interests – Warwick and Antoinette – live in the 19th century, their selves arise from another age. Warwick whispers to his inamorata: “Shall I tell you how I see you in my visions? – the mistress of an old Kentish hall, stately and gracious to all, but with the real beauty of your inner self kept for one, for the husband to whom you are the great strength in public life, the one joy of home life. I *will* not give up such a vision as that.” His vision accurately captures Antoinette’s palpable connection to an aristocratic past, for in moments of crisis “every hereditary instinct that came to her from a long line of brave men, used to rule, sprang into life at call of ‘the tocsin of her heart.’” Antoinette’s “hereditary instinct” also allows her to see – as no one else can – that Warwick, though apparently a British officer in Halifax, is fundamentally a “grand seigneur,” a “preux chevalier,” a “man sans peur, et sans reproche” (phrases signifying a perfect knight after the model of the Chevalier Bayard).⁵⁰ Jones and Saunders have created a version of what Zachary Schiffman calls “a living past” that is “both historical and atemporal.” This does not mean that the past mixes promiscuously with the present, in the manner of a Greek epic, because each is rigorously defined and kept separate. Nor does a living past amount to atavism, the jarring imposition of something outmoded upon the present. Instead, the living past constitutes “a synchronous space that preserves temporal differences while annihilating time.”⁵¹ Whatever else they do, the racial themes elaborated by Jones and Saunders create the sense of a past that bears heavily upon the present and is in some sense more real.

Perhaps no novel in the Formac series illustrates this surreal relationship between past and present, articulated once more in terms of race, better than Frances Gillmor’s *Thumbcap Weir* (1929). Gillmor takes us to Passamaquoddy Bay in the 1920s, where the splendidly evocative prose of her only published novel conjures what Davies calls “an anti-modernist vision of a society where values and outcomes were measurable.”⁵² We first see the bay through the eyes of Nicholas Sabattis, oldest of the remaining Passamaquoddy Indians, who lives on as the last survivor of a history no one else can quite recall:

And when he goes on his last long hunt, the memory of those days of tall ships from the Indies and the vessels which sailed out of the Passamaquoddy harbors in those far years will have passed with him. The Indians will have gone, leaving only their names as

50 Jones, *The Nighthawk*, 254 (emphasis in original), 53, 229, 240, 277.

51 Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 140-1.

52 Gwendolyn Davies, “Introduction” to Frances Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir* (1929; Halifax: Formac, 2005), 13.

imprints on that land of fir and granite and salt – Bocabec, Digdeguash, Pocalogan and Magaguadavic. The French explorers, who touched on the New Brunswick shore and named Letete, L'Etang and the St. Croix River, will have been forgotten. And though the sons of the English and Scottish settlers who cleared their farms from the towering trees of the first growth at Caithness and Mascarene and Scotch Settlement will pass their names and memory, they too, will fade, bit by bit, into the purple mists of the past.

Along the bay, abandoned settlements covered by moss and scrub commemorate we know not what. Only the gravestones remain “as mute witnesses of the proud day of the islands of the Passamaquoddy.”⁵³ History has already happened and it is fading from view and memory.

While this corner of the world is settled and tranquil, an atmosphere of melancholy decline also hangs over it. An old-timer laments to his neighbours in Harbor By Chance: “I can remember when the islands used to ship fish and oil to the West Indies and the bay was full of sails. Now there’s a few herring sold at Eastport, and a few hake shipped away, and an old Indian goes porpoise hunting in the fall of the year. The islands are dying, dying”⁵⁴ No one pays too much attention to Lish Penny’s ranting and raving, but no one contradicts him either. *Thumbcap Weir*, along with several other novels in this series, conveys what might be called temporal displacement, a sense – sometimes soothing, sometimes unsettling – that time has passed by. History has stopped in this place, in this community, and is going on elsewhere.⁵⁵ The effects seem clear enough, but the causes remain mysterious.⁵⁶ Life goes on, but it feels as if all of the momentous events have already occurred.⁵⁷

Were it not for Tony Luti, the close-knit Scottish-Canadians of Harbor By Chance, New Brunswick, might have lived together according to age-old arrangements mutually agreed upon long ago and which nothing would ever disturb. Something is wrong with him. All eyes avoid his “alien face” with its black beard and distrustful air. Everybody agrees “it’s a queer streak that’s in him, what with his

53 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 18, 19.

54 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 36. The “old Indian” would be the aforementioned Sabattis.

55 Arthur Hunt Chute on Arichat: “To step ashore in Arichat was to step back a century in time. A few miles of sea channel had been a wall against the changing years. Nova Scotia, on the mainland, belonged to the modern world. Isle Madame, with its little town, set there like some pearl of price, belonged to the old world and to the long ago.” See Arthur Hunt Chute, *Far Gold*, introduction by Don MacGillivray (1927; Halifax: Formac, 2008), 4.

56 Lisbeth in Rogers’s *Joan At Halfway*: “The place is drying up, Jane says She says it will be all shut up and gone to pasture land in twenty years, because there aren’t any new ones coming in, and the mines down the river draw all the people. It’s what you call too slow” (97).

57 Evelyn Richardson describes her fictional South Shore community of New Erin in the late 1800s: “New England ports each year lured more of the coast’s ambitious young, but the growing American fleets increased the demand for bait and ice from the western harbours. New Erin shared in this trade and regained much of its losses, although things were no longer done on the large scale that had once marked the island.” See Evelyn Richardson, *No Small Tempest*, introduction by Andrew Seaman (1957; Halifax: Formac, 2006), 37.

foreign blood.” Why would his poor mother have married a cannery worker from Eastport who could barely speak English? And why did Tony have to come to Harbor By Chance of all places? He and his family have no business here, where no one can understand anything about them. Tony’s son, young Tony, is a confused simpleton whom the other children taunt with chants of “Little Tony Luti has no comb, / He combs his hair with a codfish bone . . . Little Tony Luti has no sled, / He slides downhill in a codfish head.” Even kindhearted Gid Wyn, the young man from whose perspective we experience this story, cannot manage to understand the Lutis. When he meets Tony’s daughter Liz, “her eyes were dull black curtains concealing all expression and emotion as she spoke.”⁵⁸ While the Lutis are in this community, they will never be of it.

“Middle Archie” MacQuarrie speaks for everyone when he says “it was an ill day when Tony Luti came to Harbor By Chance from the canneries at Eastport. He’s of foreign blood and a hot-headed man.” No one has more trouble with Tony than the MacQuarries, the extended family of long-established Scots settlers who own farms and the rights to fishing grounds throughout the area. Their holdings include the titular Thumbcap, a tidal island that offers a fine spot for setting up weirs to catch herring. Somehow the deluded Tony believes he has bought this islet because a local trickster pretended to sell him a clumsily forged deed to the place for five dollars. Tony’s claim is preposterous. The MacQuarries gently explain to him that he has been the victim of a “heartless joke,” since they have had the grant to the Thumbcap since the reign of King George III. Tony truculently refuses to believe the grant’s authority; “How do you know the king owned it? I ask you that!” he blusters.⁵⁹ The MacQuarries are at a loss. Some of them think Tony will eventually see reason once he has a chance to calm down. Others think the trouble lies within him. Janet MacQuarrie exclaims: “If the Lutis had stayed in Eastport the settlement would be a deal better off . . . All the families in Harbor By Chance came on the Highlands about the same time and they’re all decent folk. But the Lutis have neither the fear of God nor the fear of the law in their hearts!” Perhaps she is right. As the novel continues, Tony seeks revenge against a family he believes to have somehow cheated him. With her characteristic light touch, Gillmor contextualizes the feud with references to economic stagnation. The unforgiving logic of the regional fishing economy dictates that a poor catch means starvation and a good catch simply lowers the price for herring at the cannery. Against this grim backdrop, Tony pursues his vendetta with the frightening unpredictability of someone with nothing to lose, until he nearly kills Gid Wyn and Debbie MacQuarrie when he tries to burn down Thumbcap Weir. Tony’s fundamental mistake comes from insisting on the autonomy of the present, whereas in Harbor By Chance the past has predetermined what the present can be. Middle Archie tells Tony, not unkindly, “What was granted to the MacQuarries, the MacQuarries still own.”⁶⁰ So the king himself decreed it more than a century beforehand. Yet the authority of a musty parchment to command the island

58 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 36-7, 103, 79.

59 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 44, 83. Within the novel, ownership of the Thumbcap itself is a legally separate matter from holding the privilege to build a weir there. However, in my discussion this distinction does not come into play.

60 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 75, 41.

seems unbelievable to Tony. After all, he had squatted on the Thumbcap for two years (as the MacQuarries let him do out of pity). Surely that gives him more of a right to it than some English king who never even saw the island.⁶¹ No one saw the king make the deed anyway, whereas his five-dollar deed to the Thumbcap was made in the here and the now by a process that he witnessed: “With my own eyes I saw him make the writing.”⁶² Indeed, how can Tony admit that the grant of King George has any legitimacy? His family would end up with nothing. They are the latecomers to a historical situation in which all of the resources have long since been apportioned and claimed and are now, frankly, running out. There is no more for anyone else. His crazy insistence that history remains fluid and ongoing is at odds with the social structural reality that, in Harbor By Chance, history is over. Even he must see that in the end, and when the story has come to a conclusion the Lutis have disappeared, perhaps to Boston, as they always seemed likely to do. As a local tells Gid, “It’s the foreign blood that’s in them, a roving blood that keeps them going.” They never belonged here, we always knew it, and they have left because it was always in their nature to go away. A year on, the whole episode seems to the MacQuarries like “a queer dark dream.”⁶³

Not the least remarkable feature of this book is Gillmor’s wise forbearance in keeping silent on what racial identity Tony Luti is supposed to have. The point is that he has “foreign blood,” rather than it being of one kind or another. His otherness comes from his position within the community, not from his biological constitution. Ultimately, he is foreign to the MacQuarries because he has a different relationship to history than they do. His misfortune is to embody that history as an aspect of his being, a relationship that is created and recreated in the countless references to his “hot foreign blood.”⁶⁴ Gillmor implicitly suggests that race is a metaphor to express other, more abstract, features of the social order. While a metaphor, however, it enacts a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The paradoxically relational nature of the essentialist language of race comes out when we compare *Thumbcap Weir* with a novel published only three years earlier, Frank Parker Day’s *River of Strangers*. As we saw in the passage quoted from that novel near the beginning of this review essay, Alex MacDonald’s restless impatience with the limitations of his hometown are explained by his Highland Scots ancestry: unlike his sober kinfolk, he “hark[ed] back to some MacDonald of the clans who had fought, raped, pillaged, and drunk to the fulfillment of his heart’s desire.” Yet in *Thumbcap Weir* the same ancestry is invoked by Janet MacQuarrie to explain why everyone but Tony is steady, sane, and reliable: “All the families in Harbor By Chance came on the Highlands about the same time and they’re all decent folk.” The apparent contradiction of course arises from the fact that race talk has no stable baseline underlying it. Yet, at the same time, we see the two contradictory statements

61 “You can have all your writing from all the kings of England that ever was. But there’s no talk of the Thumbcap Weir there. You’ll not deny that’s mine.” See Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 43. It may or may not matter that the source of Tony’s apparent madness is his refusal to acknowledge the writ of a king, George III, who may well have been mad himself when the grant was drawn up.

62 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 39. Tony reiterates this claim on page 48.

63 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 205, 247.

64 Gillmor, *Thumbcap Weir*, 168.

explaining two different sides of the same kind of situation. Alex, like Tony Luti but unlike Janet MacQuarrie, is at war with the entropic milieu where he lives and so he moves to the West, a region that has a different relationship to history. His decision is retrospectively made into an identity through the use of racial descriptors. The scenes of racial emergence in the Formac novels can now be seen as moments when history overtakes the body.

Even if we have abandoned the essentialist biological fantasy that once flourished around the concept of race, we are left with race as a set of symbolic practices that assign meaning to the body. When engaged in race-talk, says Paul Taylor, “we take the information, such as it is, provided to us by a human body and that body’s ancestry as a license to draw inferences about more distant, often non-physical matters.” The novels we have examined resound with race-talk as their authors assigned meanings to the bodies of their characters in their efforts to divine the nature of the historical process that has overwhelmed them. There is perhaps no more difficult task than to say how any particular person has been shaped by the sweep of history, even if it seems obvious to say that somehow we all have been. As Satzewich and Liodakis declare in their study of race and ethnicity in Canada: “It is not enough sociologically speaking to simply invoke abstract, metaphorical notions of ‘history’ as the explanation for current social conditions and social relations. While ‘history’ is without question highly relevant to the present, concrete connections need to be made between those historical conditions and individual biographies.” To establish that concrete linkage, these novelists turned to race. The body, that carrier of so many meanings, would connect the individual to history itself.⁶⁵

Subsequent generations of writers in the Atlantic region would not make this connection between history and the body through the same category of race, but perhaps that connection has remained a preoccupation in a different way. On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that, across the Western world in the decades since the Second World War, public discourse about identity has veered in a pronouncedly anti-foundationalist direction that gradually delegitimized the grand narratives about race that once captured the imagination and the allegiance of mainstream opinion. The conventional wisdom of our time now holds that, as Margaret Conrad and James Hiller claim in their history of Atlantic Canada, “Identities are not inbred; they are learned.” Even in a novel such as David Adams Richards’s *Lives of Short Duration* (1981) whose white protagonists give voice to a litany of visceral racism, such pronouncements carry no essentialist freight but arise from character and circumstance. The sodden George Terri’s leeringly racist appraisal of the Vietnamese girl who once spurned his late son Little Simon (“yellow cocksucker, ya see her all yellow, stinkin yellow – yellow bum on her, dear – yellow everything”) expresses George’s self-deceiving refusal to admit his own implication in the way his son’s life ended and consequent wish to identify a scapegoat; when the hospitalized Rance unleashes a sudden tirade against Pakistanis (“I’d grab holda that cocksucker by the scruff a the neck and rip his face off – that’d teach the bastard not ta be Canadian”), it signifies his forlorn wish to assert his power and agency in an alien institution

65 Taylor, *Race*, 16; Satzewich and Liodakis, *Race & Ethnicity in Canada*, 249.

where he finds himself intolerably patronized as a harmless buffoon; Little Simon's boldfaced lie to his grandfather Old Simon that it was not he but "those goddamn Indians" who set the fire at Lester Murphy's house says nothing about the Indians and everything about Little Simon's frightening disconnection from his own actions and, ultimately, his own life. Indeed, his duplicity earns him a rare rebuke from his soft-spoken grandfather, whose own mind is cast back over the history of his Miramichi region of New Brunswick. Old Simon finds himself remembering the turn of the previous century, when the 16-year-old Mi'kmaw girl Emma Jane Ward took up with the rich white 59-year-old Hitchman Alewood until her half-brother Tom Proud strangled her in anger and jealousy and then dragged her body to the road after stripping it naked of the European finery in which Alewood had clothed her. Everyone in the village had agreed that Tom Proud's crime simply confirmed the ineradicable savagery of his kind, for "no matter how many priests came in to civilize the bastards they'd always been like that and always would be." Old Simon kept his own counsel, thinking to himself, "but he'd *learned* that. He'd learned it all along the roadway." Identities are not, indeed, inbred but learned.⁶⁶

And yet while this novel dissociates itself from the racism of its characters by subtly positioning it as bluster, posturing, and bad faith, it is nonetheless intently concerned with the attribution of meaning to the body. An immutable predestination hangs over Richards's characters, expressed in their embodiment of a history from which they cannot escape. Alistair MacLeod remarks upon the careful attention Richards pays to the scars that mark the bodies of his characters, as well as to the clothing by means of which they forlornly attempt to code and recode those bodies. In the end, and despite their best efforts, they seem to be "marked genetically" insofar as they "are products of a past far older than the marks they carry on their flesh, for they are the historical descendants of those who have lived together in exploitation, in compassion, in fear, and, sometimes, in love, for a long, long time." MacLeod pronounces them "a kind of new/old population in which the past and present mingle with the most multi-layered of results." They cannot escape who they are, which is to say they cannot evade the historical legacy that bears down so heavily upon them that their every word, gesture, and look simply reconfirms and reconstitutes it.⁶⁷

MacLeod has explored similar themes of "genetic" marking in his own fiction, indeed using almost the same phrase in his 1985 story "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun." A family of Highland extraction finds itself in the grips of an age-old curse brought upon it by a gigantic grey dog, the *cù mòr glas*, "a sort of staghound from another time." As each new generation succeeded the last, the spectre of the *cù mòr glas* implacably brought death to their door. The latest descendants in the Canada of the 1980s cannot dismiss the curse as a mere superstition, for it lingered somewhere beyond the reach of reasoned words "in the manner of something close to a genetic possibility." They all felt uneasily as though "they carried unwanted deep possibilities within them." The narrator and his five brothers have gathered in the

66 Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2010), viii; David Adams Richards, *Lives of Short Duration*, afterword by Alistair MacLeod (1981; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 12, 116, 132.

67 Alistair MacLeod, "Afterword," in Richards, *Lives of Short Duration*, 390-1.

Toronto hospital room of their father. He is dying. No one has mentioned the curse directly. But, as their mother said just prior to her own death, “It is hard to *not* know what you do know.” Those words are a kind of prophecy. They would rather not believe in the curse, but their belief is not a choice: “We would shut our eyes and plug our ears, even as we know such actions to be of no avail. Open still and fearful to the grey hair rising on our necks if and when we hear the scrabble of the paws and the scratching at the door.” MacLeod does not mean “genetic possibility” literally, but as a metaphor to communicate a melancholy fatefulness.⁶⁸ As surely as Tony Luti, the greying band of brothers who watch their father die are helpless before the movements of a history that seems to have become an aspect of their deepest selves from which they can never escape as long as they remain who they are. In this way, we can perhaps mark the distance travelled from the racial determinism of an Evelyn Eaton or Thomas Raddall – but nevertheless see traces of their brand of historical novel in what has followed it.

The authors represented in the Formac Fiction Treasures series belonged to no literary school or circle, but they did belong to a generation. They share in common not an artistic program or literary ethos, but the experience of a shared history. Most of the novels in this series show a marked concern with the unfolding of historical time, expressed in terms of temporal displacement.⁶⁹ What we discover in reading them together – as the authors themselves would not have done, but as Formac has made possible – is not so much a record of that history, since we are dealing with works of fiction, but sustained attempts to explain what that history meant. Race, while it must remain the strangest and most off-putting aspect of these novels, is also revealed as a coded language to express how different people – sometimes against their will – were led to inhabit that history as an aspect of their embodied selves.

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68 Alistair MacLeod, “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” in MacLeod, *Island: The Complete Stories* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 310, 318-20 (emphasis in original).

69 Of those novels that display little or no concern with the dynamics of human history, many either take place outside the Atlantic region, like James De Mille’s *The Lady of the Ice*, introduction by George L. Parker (1870; Halifax: Formac, 2010); or have nonhuman animal protagonists, like Charles G.D. Roberts’s *The Red Fox*, introduction by Brian Bartlett (1905; Halifax: Formac, 2008) and *The Heart of the Ancient Wood*, introduction by Thomas Hodd (1900; Halifax: Formac, 2007); or combine both of these features, as in the case of Margaret Marshall Saunders’s *Beautiful Joe: An Autobiography*, introduction by Gwendolyn Davies (1894; Halifax: Formac, 2001).

