

## “Off to one side of the curve”

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**“Off to one side of the curve”:  
Perpetual Expedition and Regional  
Identity in M. Wylie Blanchet’s  
*The Curve of Time***

CARL WATTS

“ALL OF IT SEEMS UNCHARTED” (ix), writes Timothy Egan of the British Columbia coast as described in M. Wylie Blanchet’s *The Curve of Time* (1961).<sup>1</sup> And while a variety of writers have proclaimed the text a lost, “minor” (Geddes vi), or “unlikely” (Twigg 138) classic, Egan’s words inadvertently identify a disturbing undercurrent in this memoir-like story of a widowed mother who took her children on summer-long voyages up and down the hazardous waters of the British Columbia coastline in the years leading up to the Second World War. For it is the desire to traverse the uncharted, and for the latter to remain as such in spite of the countless comings and goings of the Blanchets and writers to follow, that emerges as the fundamental device structuring the text’s subject matter, themes, and form. In this essay, I first want to suggest that, in spite of its merits as a document of one woman’s unique and path-breaking experiences, *The Curve of Time* misappropriates First Nations histories and cultures in order to present a romanticized version of British Columbia’s coastal wilderness in which Euro-Canadian subjects perform a single moment of expedition and discovery in perpetuity. Secondly, I argue that commentators who herald the text’s several commemorative editions contribute to a dangerously misleading conception of British Columbia regionalism that conflates Blanchet’s personal experiences with the characteristics of a larger, historically varied, and socially diverse region. In doing so, such praise ignores the economic injustices and cultural complexities on Canada’s West Coast, and instead verges on taking a living history of Euro-Canadian possession and misappropriation as normative.

While some reviews and critical treatments of *The Curve of Time* do make note of Blanchet’s “period view of orcas and Indians” (Egan x), many ignore the distortions and contradictions that character-

ize Blanchet's treatment of time. While Ruby Andrew characterizes Blanchet's descriptions of First Nations cultures and settlements as conveying "a mixture of respect and trepidation" (par. 18), for example, this review nevertheless subscribes to a view of the West Coast as a pristine and picturesque setting to be experienced by a chosen few explorers, free spirits, or "eccentric hermits" (par. 3). Egan himself writes that Blanchet's British Columbia — that of the 1920s to 1940s — exists prior to its present occupation of a cosmopolitan "world niche for its blending of nature and eclectic culture" (ix), and he valorizes the text's picture of "mountain men and natives who had yet to become commodities" (x).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Cathy Converse's biography, *Following the Curve of Time* (2008), contains detailed information regarding Blanchet's history and biases, though its main purpose is to remedy the fact that the author wrote very little about her own life (4). It does much to illuminate Blanchet's life and the daring summer journeys she took through uncharted waters while renting out her home in order to support her family following the death of her husband. Accordingly, Converse's text celebrates Blanchet as a bold figure and the author of a unique travel document without treating her as the central figure of a semi-autobiographical tract charting an expedition of sometimes questionable ideological import. Philip Teece's review of Converse's work goes further in this direction, praising her emphasis on the person rather than the story. His statement that "All the questions have been answered and all our curiosity satisfied" (31) suggests that additional knowledge about the life of "Capi" Blanchet is all that is required to confirm *The Curve of Time* as a regional classic.

Teece also admits that, apart from its regional allure, Blanchet's text has endured due to its tales of a woman navigating alone through remote coastal water, which was a "phenomenon without precedent" (31). Nancy Pagh extends this approach in *At Home Afloat* (2001), a study of women writing at sea in the Pacific Northwest. Pagh reads a series of memoirs, boating logs, and other forms of life writing through the critical lens of autobiography studies, focusing on "the ways that feminine discourse . . . shapes female boat travellers' constructions of Native people" and arguing that these constructions emphasize the writers' femininity and posit imagined links between themselves and indigenous women (xiv). This emphasis on discourse and its interrelatedness with subjectivity is a unique contribution to autobiography scholarship;

still, Pagh's examination of *The Curve of Time* as an example of autobiographical subject formation sets a dangerous precedent by neglecting Blanchet's more specific conceptions of her surroundings. The economy of praise that has arisen around Blanchet's text in recent years has similarly conflated Capi's own journey with larger ideas of region in a way that does not take into account the varied peoples and histories that have defined Canada's West Coast both at the time of Capi's adventure and in the present.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, in emphasizing Blanchet's writing as a defiantly gendered story of one individual, commentators obscure the sometimes deeply self-interested roots of her picture of life on the British Columbia coast. Reading the text's temporal thematic as located in a regional milieu rather than signifying only the complexities of individual memory reveals just how solipsistic and exclusive Blanchet's conception of an exotic, sparsely inhabited British Columbia coast can be.

Rather than separating author and text, I would argue for the importance of reading the latter's titular theme as a strategy for accommodating Blanchet's extended act of exploration as well as an aestheticization of autobiographical events. On the first page following the text's foreword, Blanchet explains her key principle of organization:

Maeterlinck used a curve to illustrate Dunne's theory [of time]. Standing in the Present, on the highest point of the curve, you can look back and see the Past, or forward and see the Future, all in the same instant. Or, if you stand off to one side of the curve, as I am doing, your eye wanders from one to the other without any distinction. (*Curve of Time* 13)<sup>4</sup>

I want to suggest that Blanchet's understanding of time is somewhat more complex than this description lets on and that it involves performance as much as memory. Blanchet's apprehension of the people and places of the West Coast at times recalls what Kristi Siegel and Toni B. Wulff describe as the traveller's tendency to equate sight with knowledge and to use one's own cultural biases to inform larger ideas about the objects of one's sightseeing (112). Siegel and Wulff find this process intensified in the twentieth-century Western traveller's "scan," which is born of the rapid surveying of images necessary to navigate "landscapes of speed, saturation, and spectacle" and which succeeds the "gaze" employed by previous travellers (117). This mode of perception, when applied to landscapes that appear "blank or desolate,"

involves the rapid reorganization of fleetingly detected objects into systems influenced by experience in fast-paced information societies (117). Still, Siegel and Wulff note that voluntary travel may be characterized by scanning “as its *initial* perceptual mode” regardless of whether or not the traveller comes from a “shopping-mall society” (118).<sup>5</sup> Blanchet’s preoccupation with a subjective notion of time suggests that such a reorganizing scan may have marked the content of *The Curve of Time* from the outset and that the text’s arrangement of images and experiences may further manipulate past, present, and future so as to create a picture of region based on movement and discovery. Rather than accommodating a simple love of travel, however, the text rearranges the region’s people, places, and histories to sustain a moment of exploration and discovery that never lapses into one of settlement. In this moment, First Nations are always ancient; the rustic settlements of the early colonial period are the living present; and any more permanent buildings or infrastructure, or more advanced technology, are part of the looming and undesirable future.

*The Curve of Time*’s performance of this particular moment resonates with some of Bruce Braun’s findings regarding the late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century phenomenon of “wilderness travel” along Canada’s West Coast. Braun identifies urban travellers’ desires to return to a state of wilderness, and designates the crossing of civilization/wilderness boundaries such as the edge of Tofino on Vancouver Island as also representing a traversal of a temporal boundary between the modern and the archaic (109-10). Blanchet’s continuous, unchronological journeys function as a perpetual inhabitation of such a liminal space, and they certainly allow her, in Braun’s words, to “reaffirm the present — and [her] own identity — as modern” (112). Rather than enacting what Braun calls the contemporary urbanite’s “fantasy of regression” (127), however, Blanchet narrates her experience of the landscape in a way that draws out the moment of expedition into perpetuity. Her reshaping of time not only enlists an exotic landscape as “the terrain for the remaking of Western subjects” (Braun 139), but also harnesses her own subjectivity to a temporal agency that extends what she seems to regard as the most legitimate or authentic moment of the region’s history — the very moment of possession that precedes the injustices, economic complexities, and hybridities that followed Euro-Canadian settlement.

Blanchet’s representation of First Nations occurs within this perpetu-

ated moment of discovery and, as a result, the text views indigenous people in accordance with a type of spatial and temporal movement that Johannes Fabian calls “allochronic distancing” (149). Fabian argues that modern anthropology, due to influences from the Christian tradition and Enlightenment, came to regard cultures that were spatially distant from Europe as defined also by their distance in time (11-12). This “denial of coevalness” (35) to anthropology’s objects has persistently informed the discipline, resulting in the continued positing of non-Western cultures as existing in wholly other times, often for the purposes of accommodating Western imperialism’s spatial expansion (95). While allochronic distancing is easy to find in a staggering variety of European descriptions of other cultures, Blanchet’s case yet again provides a variation on this tendency. Rather than reiterating the “petrified relation” (Fabian 143) between multiply distanced cultures, her distancing confines First Nations to a single, infinite moment, in which they are constantly receding spatially and declining historically as she moves forward on a perpetual expedition that refuses to terminate in settlement.

Blanchet thus politicizes Maeterlinck’s theory about the subjective nature of time by incorporating First Nations into her personal moment of exploration and possession. By standing “off to one side of the curve,” she reorganizes historical tropes to draw this moment out into perpetuity, thereby fashioning a purely modern subjectivity defined by its appropriation of several hundred years of West Coast history. *The Curve of Time* achieves this by portraying First Nations’ role in the region as not only restricted to the realm of pre-contact history, but also, thanks to a grammar enabling their depiction as continually in the process of becoming absent, as permanently in decline. Blanchet’s performance of her modern identity, meanwhile, requires dwelling in a temporal liminality she maps with her perpetual crossing between sites of a spatialized indigenous past, and inhabiting this space allows her to identify with First Nations in a way that reduces these cultures to material objects as a strategy of disavowing the realities of Euro-Canadian settlement. After tracing this process, I will place such a reading into relief with the reviewers who valorize Blanchet and her personal story rather than read these ideological markings. I argue that such a sleight of hand falls short of more prudent examples of regional criticism, which highlight these

complexities rather than foster Euro-Canadian nostalgia for a sparsely settled, temperate hinterland in the West.

For all its surreal descriptions of coastal foliage and wildlife, *The Curve of Time*'s most omnipresent backdrop seems instead to be the hazy, lingering pre-history of First Nations. Blanchet refers to these people as inhabiting the "Past," a word that keeps such a history locked in an anachronistic period of harmony. The remnants of these cultures that are visible (usually in the form of bones, decaying clam shells, half-buried artifacts, and supposedly abandoned villages) appear as ancient relics from an idealized pre-contact history. Those few living indigenous people who do appear, however, are described with odd grammatical constructions that mark them as living artifacts. For while Blanchet shifts between narrating specific events in the simple past tense and describing rules or natural processes in the simple present ("I didn't have a rod — you can't cast in this kind of growth, there is no room" [15]), her references to First Nations people receive strangely isolating additions. In one early example, she moves to the past perfect tense: "Yesterday, we had passed a slender Indian dugout" (68). Then, she describes those in the dugout as performing activities in a past continuous tense that is lodged further in the mediated anteriority resulting from the initial shift to the past perfect: "An Indian was standing up in the bow, holding aloft a long fish-spear poised, ready to strike. His woman was crouched in the stern, balancing the canoe with her paddle" (68-69). Blanchet here departs from grammatical consistency, which would have required the past perfect continuous ("An Indian had been standing up in the bow"), and portrays these figures as simultaneously further in the past and yet acting as such in the more vivid present (indicated by the past continuous tense). Significantly, such grammatical augmentations overlap with some of the purely hypothetical depictions of indigenous people that follow. "It was harder to imagine the women," she muses upon entering one village. "Perhaps they were shy. I could only catch glimpses of them; they would never let me get very close. . . . They were sitting there teasing wool with their crooked old fingers" (77). This temporal repositioning adds extra weight to the book's central theme. When Blanchet asks, "When was it that we had watched them? Yesterday? a hundred years ago? or just somewhere on that curve of Time?" (69), the implicit answer is that she could have been watching them at any time and they would still be acting in the anterior.

Such slippages continue even when Blanchet uses what Fabian describes as the tense of the “ethnographic present” (80). Much anthropological writing uses this tense (in statements such as “the *X* are matrilineal”) to present a society as frozen, characterized by “repetitiveness, predictability, and conservatism” (81) and presupposed as an object to be observed (86). When Blanchet makes such observations, however, she tends also to locate such timeless, present-tense cultural practices within the past tense of historicized Western contexts. She describes, for instance, “a white-shell beach,” which “is a distinguished feature of the old Indian villages”; “every old village has one” (70). Preceding descriptions of villages, however, mark this frozen present as determined by the inevitable decline of First Nations before advancing Europeans. One site’s inhabitants have fled “on account of the fleas. In all our summers up the coast we have always found the Indian villages empty. Most of them are winter villages to which the Indians come back after being off in their dugouts all summer” (51). Here, these people are cast as repeatedly cowering in the aftermath of forced modernization; their absence is at once permanent and recurring. What emerges is another example of mixed grammar, which expresses the moment of decline as natural and ongoing as well as culminating in the temporal stasis of a perfect tense: “But whatever their origin, when discovered they were a long way back on the road that all civilizations have traveled — being a simple stone-age people, fighting nature with stone-age tools and thoughts. In one hundred and fifty years we have hustled them down a long, long road” (73). Shortly afterwards, the text returns to the tense of the ethnographic present to express this contradiction with a different image — one that attributes this conflicted temporality to First Nations themselves: “They hang on to the old life with the left hand, and clutch the new life with the right” (73).

Ultimately, Blanchet dissolves these grammatical complexities into an infinite mysticism that matches First Nations’ indefinite physical decline. Such cultural practices are here expressed with verb forms (such as the infinitive) that are again located in the anterior: “It was important in the Indian mind to be buried properly with carefully observed rites. People who were drowned at sea could not go to the next world, but were doomed to haunt the beaches for ever” (102). At one point, these practices persist so far beyond settler-determined contexts that First Nations are granted a narrative of decay so infinite it seems to outlast



even the logic of Blanchet's expedition. One group, for example, continues to pay tribute to the village of Mamalilaculla, which conquered them in some undated raid the local missionaries have long forgotten. The missionaries "had tried to tell the people in the village that it wasn't Christian to keep on exacting tribute all these years," yet "could do nothing — the strange Indians still appeared every winter" (109). Indians themselves may be stranded on an arc of decline, but as part of this existence, their superstitious practices extend forward as a timeless yet static trace. In this case, the missionaries do not even remember "how much they had to pay, or what the tribute was" (109).

Locked into this anterior realm, ever in the process of declining and becoming absent, First Nations are given a narrow range of roles to play. Blanchet mentions at one point, for instance, that some of the indigenous people Captain Vancouver sighted on one of his voyages were in possession of firearms; she quickly elaborates that they also had "heavy black beards — proof, I should think, that the Spaniards and Russians had been on the north-west coast for many years" (52). As soon as a group of indigenous people is described as possessing technology that does not mesh with conceptions of their lack of modernity, in other words, they are denigrated as not fully Indian. Braun points out the persistence of such attitudes into the late twentieth century, writing that notions of indigenous modernity frequently disrupt adventure travellers' preconceived notions of the West Coast wilderness (120). Similarly, Blanchet, at one point, describes the "heavily barred doors" (94) on some buildings in a village near Blunden Harbour. Despite the presence of a sign denoting ownership by the Nagwadakwa People, Blanchet writes that she "ignored Mr. Potladakami George and his notices and padlocks" and "took the-way-of-souls, and entered by the two loose boards, round at the side, that are always left for departing spirits" (94). Such attitudes were certainly commonplace in Blanchet's day: Converse, for example, notes that her views were, in fact, refreshingly free of the paternalism dominant at the time (143). She also states that it was understandable that Blanchet would have assumed many villages were abandoned given the forced migrations that had recently taken their toll on the Kwakwaka'wakw (123). Although it would be unfair to criticize Blanchet for making such assumptions, Converse also includes these views as contributing to the text's narrative strategy, in which more nuanced information is "perhaps not important" and read-

ers are “left to tease out where she was and which group she was writing about” (121). Denial of indigenous modernity does, however, play a key role in supporting this strategy and its larger temporal logic.

Blanchet, meanwhile, opposes this anterior history by performing the rugged modernity of the region’s early explorers and settlers and thereby spatializing the temporal gap between herself and First Nations. This enactment of constant movement, however, also requires her to mix up stages in the progress narrative of post-contact settler society. She recalls, for instance, that George Vancouver “of course had no charts — he was there to make them” (19) and attempts to find precisely where Juan de Fuca had “actually gone when he was on this coast in the 1590s” (162). Her dependence on various villages and outposts for the purpose of replenishing her fuel supply and provisions (146), however, undercuts this desire to recreate such pioneering voyages. When the *Caprice* breaks down, Capi makes an interesting attempt to carry this spirit of self-sufficiency forward into her world of gas-powered yachting. She states that, though she does not know how to re-time the engine, she “was reasonably cheerful”: “I knew the theory of the thing. It would have been sheer madness to take the trips on the part of the coast where we did unless I knew something about an engine” (142). The situation is dangerous enough for complete ignorance of her craft to be “sheer madness,” but not so dangerous as to warrant genuine unease. Since replacement parts are never actually too far out of reach, she crafts a composite rusticity out of the somewhat-uncharted wilderness and her access to modern technology: “Engines were invented and reared by men. They are used to being sworn at, and just take advantage of you; if you are polite to them — you get absolutely nowhere” (143). By the end of the episode, Blanchet confesses that, “For the moment, I had lost my taste for places where no one else ever went — a state of mind begotten of a dead battery” (148). The irony here suggests that she acknowledges the contradictions of her narrative, but this is the exception to the text’s rule of expeditionary tale rubbing uneasily against a desire for some of the comforts of a slightly more modern historical moment. This desire for rusticity again recalls Braun’s observation that undesirably complex technology would, for later adventure travellers, threaten to “disrupt the temporal narrative that was the key to the expedition’s nostalgic mode of travel” (123). In this sense, mimicking the routes of seafaring vessels of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries using gas-powered pleasure

craft and then downplaying the infrastructure accommodating the latter is itself exemplary of the text's bending of developmental narratives to suit a preferred moment of modern subjectivity.

The primary function of this uncertain stage of material development is to contrast with the text's indigenous stasis, and it is with a narrative of mobility — the narrative of the expedition — that Blanchet maps her manipulation of history onto a spatial plane. Unbound by the limits of chronology, these journeys require slipping “farther and farther into [the] Past” (69) of the area's indigenous peoples. Although in some ways they resemble Conradian voyages into the wilderness, it takes no large stretch of the imagination to link these excursions to Anne McClintock's conception of imperialist voyages into non-Western territories as moving “backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory” (40). Rather than conceiving of her journeys as terminating with settlement and some civilizing mission, however, Blanchet rejects any disruption of her space of performance. At first angry about the coming of “the Man from California” (25), she goes on to contrast her own vision of “paradise” (31) with that of the man, whom she describes as that first “wedge of civilization . . . driven into our favourite inlet” (29). The man reacts with a groan when confronted with the Blanchets' berry collecting and trouble with bears; she attributes this to the “spoil[ing]” of his paradise, and then asks, “But what about ours?” (31). Here the same notion of paradise is split between two journeys: one in which the “Man from California” enjoys what remains of the West Coast landscape as part of the first wave of Euro-American settlers, and another in which the Blanchets repeatedly cross into spatialized pockets of an era that must remain isolated, like the indigenous past, from any signs of encroaching development.

Pagh refers to this same episode as part of her look at the development of an enlarged middle class in the region, which contributed to a growing premium on space. In the 1940s and 1950s, she writes, boating became newly accessible to middle- and working-class consumers (28); accordingly, “competition for space on the water” became a uniquely Northwestern version of class-based tension (29). This urge to appropriate space is certainly operative in *The Curve of Time*. Rather than merely emphasizing class differences, however, Blanchet's desire to cruise through permanently unsettled space extends the appropriative urge of Pagh's more privileged boaters into larger conceptions of regional his-

tory. Her enactment of colonial exploration not only claims a swath of untouched hinterland for her family, but also maps the entire space of the coast as territory frozen in a single moment of possession. Adding this temporal dimension to her spatial claim inscribes the competition for space that Pagh identifies as a fundamental component of West Coast seafaring narratives. Indeed, Blanchet's text is explicitly premised upon this urge to possess land and distort its past and future into a perpetually performed present. *The Curve of Time's* approximation of magic realism is the logical formal endpoint of this appropriative urge.

As they begin to spend less time in the inlet the author deems "too populated for her" (Converse 94), the Blanchets embark on a trip that further eschews the constraints of space and time. The children search for a seahorse while Capi privately recreates de Fuca's voyages in the background; meanwhile, her older narrating voice reflects on the odds of finding such an animal:

Sometimes I have chased down the years on a sure clue, looking for a source — only to find that it was something I had read to them; they had played around with it in their minds, thoroughly mixed it up with fantasy, and a couple of years later presented it to me as an actual fact. Which, I suddenly realize, is a fairly good description of a seahorse. (161-62)

Here, the Blanchets' voyage across boundaries of time also begins to traverse those separating the real from the imaginary. Several events leading up to this moment, however, make it clear that such transgressions must remain under their control. Blanchet links her dreams of shape-shifting animals with "the man in black down in Vancouver Bay that turned into a bear" (25), for example, but quickly decides that the process cannot limit her family's agency: "Maeterlinck was beginning to spoil our summer — if the dreams were going to work both ways we would soon be afraid to get off the boat" (28). The West Coast's space of constant boundary crossings — of time and space, as well as real and the imagined — thus fuses Euro-Canadian subjectivity and strict narrative control. As with Blanchet's descriptions of First Nations, the endpoint here is the collapsing of boundaries between what occurred and what she wished to occur. This inhabitation of a temporal liminality culminates in *The Curve of Time's* central storytelling strategy,

and both are bound up in the narrator's enactment of a pronouncedly modern identity.

It is as part of this dynamic that the text transgresses cultural boundaries, with the Blanchets treating what they regard as the remnants of the indigenous Past as cultural artifacts they can possess in order to enhance this performance. The experience of sifting through the lost artifacts from this Past intensifies the malleability of the timeline of their journeys, as Blanchet proclaims that "days get lost or found so easily when you have been playing with years and centuries in old Indian villages" (97). Converse points out that Blanchet's selective retellings of these occasions omit the clapboard "whiteman" houses that existed among her beloved artifacts, and that she also neglected to mention the large kegs that were set on two totem poles carved by Chief Peter Smith of the Kwakwaka'wakw. While Converse maintains that Blanchet made such an omission because the wooden barrels perhaps "seemed incongruous with what she had learned of totems and carving" (127), this latter point also highlights a different impulse. Blanchet took several of these artifacts home with her, including "a number of bracelets, one of which she wore for years," in spite of the fact that these sites were inhabited and the items she collected often had owners nearby (Converse 143). Considering the text's emphasis on and repetition of First Nations' absences, as well as its elaborate performance of a pre-settlement Euro-Canadian identity, what emerges here is an accompanying process in which indigenous cultures are converted to objects as further support for this specific brand of modernity.

This dynamic is especially apparent at the various points at which Blanchet ruminates on First Nations' origins and cultural practices, often as part of her attempts to "save their Past for them" (79). Still, this commitment to salvage ethnography is eventually undercut by the sense of playfulness that issues from the text's malleable temporality. After handling the remains of at least one human body in an indigenous gravesite, Blanchet expounds on First Nations' interment practices, archaeological sites, and spiritual beliefs, while Peter, still digging around in this possibly sacred site, exclaims, "We're always getting mixed up with Indians and things, aren't we?" (105). This mixing also involves the conflation of sentimental and preservationist impulses, which marks these actions as indicative more of the all-encompassing nature of their identity as observers than of their meaningful engage-

ment with other cultures. And, what knowledge they do gain is interwoven with the Blanchets' overarching identity as amateur collectors of anachronistic items the world over. When ruminating on the possible origins of the inhabitants of this stretch of coast, they recall carved figures found on Vancouver Island that had "elongated, pierced ear lobes, and rather Egyptian features" (104) and which resembled "Toltec carvings in the museum down in Mexico" (105).

This conversion of cultures into objects adorning the Blanchets' modernity is in some ways the final element reinforcing their temporal aloofness and denying the post-settlement realities of the region. While Pagh argues that Blanchet questions her ability to become a cultural insider by acknowledging that she is "the counterfeit in this particular world" (114), her proof equally highlights the extent to which these acts locate her as both at home in the region and a visitor to a foreign land. She points to Blanchet's statements that she "did not understand . . . or never knew" First Nations culture (78), and that her family "were just visitors" (102) in their villages (Pagh 113). While certainly denoting a lack of complete callousness on Blanchet's part, such comments attribute to her a permanent mobility that is intertwined with her temporal distortions — or, in other words, cast her as a permanent tourist in search of souvenirs. When her son John, digging in the aforementioned gravesite, "hold[s] tight on to his piece of old Indian" (105), the extended moment of First Nations' decline becomes embodied as a fetish object representing an instant of presence becoming absence. Armed with such items, the Blanchets continue their endless voyages through lands conceived as existing apart from the ravages of European settlement.

It is significant that Blanchet's storytelling mechanism winds down with an attempt to portray the landscape itself as equally fluid. When she describes "a great upheaval, and then subsidence" during which "some awful force picked [the land] up, held it at arm's length, and then let it drop sideways in an untidy muddle" (223), it is almost as if the very physical substance of the region has also fallen under the sway of her narrative's tweaking of temporal and cultural realities. Fittingly, both Pagh and Converse conclude their works in ways that highlight the text's implicit endorsement of such a performative, revision-based generation of region. Pagh's study closes by suggesting that her writers "lear[n] to accept the hierarchy of man over nature" in a "glamorous moment on a romanticized frontier, happily ignorant of woman's pos-

ition in that hierarchy" (152). In so doing, it posits a female performance of (conventionally male) imperialist, exploratory, and proprietary urges as the endpoint of the development of the Northwest Coast narratives she studies. Converse, meanwhile, reemphasizes the split between the woman and her story, stating that Blanchet is an "enigma" (185) who "artfully drew her readers into an enchanting world from which they don't want to emerge" (186). In closing her meticulous study with praise for the "remarkable woman" (186) who wrote *The Curve of Time*, she conflates such real-life accomplishments with a narrative that is structured by, and which implicitly endorses, such a proprietary urge. Both studies are important contributions to our knowledge of lives lived in the region; when their conclusions are applied to *The Curve of Time* as a stand-alone text, however, the result is that the potentially dubious ideology of the latter may go overlooked.

Unfortunately, many of the positive reviews of the text's republications do just that, and in the process fall short of the standards set by the most prudent kinds of West Coast regional criticism. Whether they come from the Canadian or the American side of the border, these works tend to acknowledge the basic tension between the voice of the individual and the historical realities behind superimposed formations of regional culture. Two American volumes edited in whole or in part by William G. Robbins, *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest* (1983) and *The Great Northwest: The Search for Regional Identity* (2001), for example, take an interdisciplinary approach to such issues. In the first, Richard Maxwell Brown identifies a tension inherent in even the most general conceptions of region, in which "classic" and "counter-classic" narratives arise due to the growth of cultural practices that differ greatly from traditional views of life in the Northwest (71). Such a point reflects the tendency of some American studies of Northwest regionalism to mistrust large cultural generalizations in a way that opposes efforts to inscribe certain texts as emblematic of a particular region.<sup>6</sup> In the second collection, John Michael Power takes Brown's point further, stating that even economic policy in the region is often (mis)directed by the persistence of popular notions of the historical and continued importance of resource extraction. Like Brown, Power identifies the stubborn persistence of "cultural beliefs unrelated to current economic reality" (80).<sup>7</sup>

In Canada, Laurie Ricou has done much to articulate literary regionalism in a way that acknowledges the multiplicity of Northwest voices

and experiences and the impossibility of capturing such a dynamic in narrative form. He acknowledges in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* (2002) that many regional archetypes persist in spite of their irrelevance to the day-to-day lives of regional writers: "In the Northwest, space gets its human face, becomes culture and a *place*, through cedar and mist, and especially in salmon. I personally find fishing tedious, and an allergy usually prevents me from eating salmon, but I *must* write about them" (101). Existing as one of the "files" that comprises Ricou's attempt to write an inventory of region in which "stories and words and discoveries [are] clustered according to some shifting set of associations" (2), these passages anticipate Ricou's *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* (2007). Here, the author abandons a definitive critical analysis of region in favour of describing the tropes and underlying realities of region according to the rhizomatic quality of its titular Northwest plant. Ricou's conception of literary region, in other words, thrives on the impossibility of drafting collective and historical experiences into any authoritative narrative.

Both takes on regional writing are compelling and cautious. Unfortunately, champions of *The Curve of Time* square with neither. Much of the praise surrounding the text amounts to a blinkered regionalism that falls far short of the standards set by Ricou and Robbins. Teece, for instance, is not only willing to accept the narrative's temporal segregation of First Nations, but also seems to endorse its romantic qualities by lauding Blanchet's descriptions of "dozens of First Nations villages at their final moment of existence in original form, before their absorption into 'whiteman' culture" (31). Even Twigg's compendious volume ends its entry on *The Curve of Time* by lamenting that the "*Caprice* was sold for \$700 after WWII" and that the abandoned residence the Blanchets discovered, the "ivy-covered home known as Little House," was "torn down in 1948 . . . and replaced by a new building" (139). What resonates here is not the loss of particular historical buildings and vessels, but rather their replacement by more modern versions. Presumably, readers would be happier (though less in need of tales such as Blanchet's) if ivy-covered homes and corroded, failing batteries were more prevalent amid today's coastal properties.<sup>8</sup> What emerges from such statements is an implicit endorsement and repetition of that same mixed stage of development accompanying Blanchet's moment of exped-



itionary modernity, and the result is a dangerously nostalgic conception of the West Coast as locked in a permanent phase of discoverability.

Another troubling element of such regionalism is what Ricou has described as the “upstart indigenouness that has permeated the urbanization of the Pacific Northwest over the past two centuries” (*Arbutus* 7). Ricou mentions that this notion’s “uglier complement of smug complacency” does permeate some forms of Northwest writing (162), and other studies of the region’s cultural production do refer to vague notions of spirituality or re-energized humanism in order to portray some meaningful link between settler and landscape in a way that side-steps the presence of indigenous people. Douglas Todd, for instance, closes one recent collection by saying, “Many mistakes have been made [as the region has developed] — including too much logging, too many strip malls and too casual an acceptance of the chasm between the elite and the disenfranchised” (274). These points are valid, but the offhand inclusion of the final one brings to mind the way Blanchet’s privileged position is all too easily effaced in some discussions of her adventures and flirtations with indigeneity. Such complacency is perhaps most dangerous in regional criticism that argues that singular West Coast landscapes *do* foster indigeneity and radically different ontologies and epistemologies for its Euro-Canadian or American inhabitants. One recent article about Northern British Columbia writers argues that

A person adopts the characteristics of the outer landscape they inhabit, integrating it into their interior landscape. We can apply this model to the people of Northern British Columbia. In a region where the outer landscape is so dramatic and such an integral part of daily life, the projection is extremely strong. The inner landscape of Northern people is marbled with the characteristics of the region they live in. (Thornton 212)<sup>9</sup>

Phrased in such a way, even criticism with good intentions risks perpetuating a reductive conception of regional writing that, like Blanchet’s infinite moment of discovery, ignores complex cultural politics and ongoing economic injustices. This shifting of the conversation is the most worrisome consequence of declaring a text such as *The Curve of Time* a regional classic. Capi Blanchet lived a noteworthy life and produced a fascinatingly idiosyncratic account of her experiences; proclaiming that her temporally skewed notion of Canada’s West Coast is exemplary of regional writing, however, curves our perception of the

region in a way that is as ethically irresponsible as it is philosophically questionable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> After the appearance of four chapters in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *The Curve of Time* was published by Blackwood in Edinburgh in 1961. The first Canadian edition (Sidney: Gray's, 1968) was followed by several reprints by Gray's and other West Coast presses, the most recent of which is a fiftieth anniversary edition (2011) by Whitecap Books. Egan's introduction is reprinted here, but it was first published in the 2002 Seal edition. All page references from Blanchet's main text refer to the 1968 Gray's edition.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Egan writes of a British Columbia known for its "postcard-quality scenery marketed to an audience that travels by cruise ship or jumbo jet from Tokyo" (x) before holding up a prior version of uncharted coastline for a similar form of literary marketing. This kind of shifting commodification seems central to much of the region's tourist industry; see, for example, Braun 109-55.

<sup>3</sup> Pagh is careful to point out that the area she has staked out for her study exists only as part of larger systems of oppression. She states early on that figures such as Blanchet were, at least in the first half of the twentieth century, "privileged (White, upper- and middle-class) women" (xiii). She also, however, emphasizes Capi's own development at sea in comparison to male predecessors rather than drawing out the implications of more and more people claiming larger swaths of maritime space for themselves while bemoaning the encroachment of others.

<sup>4</sup> Blanchet also describes the specific text providing this inspiration: "On board our boat one summer we had a book by Maurice Maeterlinck called *The Fourth Dimension*, the fourth dimension being *Time* — which, according to Dunne, doesn't exist in itself, but is always relative to the person who has the idea of *Time*" (13).

<sup>5</sup> Siegel and Wulff note that highways, television, or simply "ever-burgeoning amounts of text" have resulted in this shift (117). In addition, they cite the Internet as related to such an obsession with speed and movement despite the fact that "few activities involve less motion than sitting in front of a computer screen" (118). Given their emphasis on a general privileging of motion over direct physical experience, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that Blanchet's early-twentieth-century relocations, coupled with her intense interest in early explorations of the region, could have resulted in a similar perceptual mode.

<sup>6</sup> Richard White makes a similar point about "frontier" societies projecting pre-existing cultural beliefs onto a landscape rather than emphasizing cultural practices informed by the environment as an objective force (111).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen W. Haycox goes furthest with this take on cultural belief versus economic reality, referring to the most densely populated part of Alaska as a "replication corridor" in which inhabitants at once demand the conveniences of urban life and "believe themselves to be living in a unique place, exotic by the norms of American experience" (148). While a little farther afield than Blanchet's coastline, the least populated sub-national territory of the Northwest provides an extreme example of the dissonance between regional realities and those conceptions of region that are projected toward outsiders.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Virginia Lee Burton's popular children's book *The Little House* (1942) tells the story of a country house that is gradually surrounded by agricultural, suburban, and then urban development. Its builder's great-great-granddaughter discovers the house lying in disrepair, and, after noticing "something about the Little House" (32), has it moved

to a different rural setting. Whether the name “Little House” caught on before or after the appearance of Burton’s book, the fact that Blanchet uses it so repeatedly in *The Curve of Time* suggests that the resonance may not be mere coincidence. Blanchet’s own children’s book, *A Whale Named Henry* (published posthumously in 1983), begins with Henry’s mother warning him to stay away from “the huge freighters on the shipping lane in Juan de Fuca Strait, bound for the cities of Seattle, Victoria, and Vancouver” (4). The story ends with Henry’s escape to the wild, and parts of this tale appear in conversations with Blanchet’s children in *The Curve of Time*.

<sup>9</sup> Chelsea Thornton’s article describes the work of Northern British Columbia writers such as Jacqueline Baldwin and Eden Robinson, and is included in an anthology that seeks to identify “a set of vivid signifiers that effectively constitute a previously undefined ‘literacy of place’” (Carolan 12).

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