

**CENTERED IN MYTH:
WHITE WESTERN WOMEN'S MEMOIR**

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ABSTRACT

The idea of a mythological West is not a new one. The American West has been mythologized by movies, books, and people in general since the West became a settling place for the white pioneers. Interestingly, the dominant mythology of the West as a rugged, masculine space is created and perpetuated primarily by white people. This paper seeks to understand how the memoirs of western white women create new, other mythologies of the West beyond the white masculinist ones seen so often as the dominant viewpoint. In examining Mary Clearman Blew's memoir *All But the Waltz*, the theoretical ideas and implications of how memoir functions in creating and dispelling myths are considered.

INTRODUCTION

Finding a 'Real' West

The term “westerner” has many mixed connotations. For many Americans, the idea of a westerner is a person who lives on a ranch, wears a cowboy hat, and listens to country music. Regardless of the images that the term conjures, there is always a static idea that the “West” is a real place, that it has defining characteristics, and that it can define people. The idea that a “true” West or a “real” West exists is more problematic than claiming oneself as a westerner, simply because it is easy to claim to belong to a region that has no actual defining characteristics. I have always believed, as Krista Comer states, that “The ‘real’ West includes the Rocky Mountain states, Idaho and Montana, and the Southwest” (68). California, as everyone who is a “true” westerner knows, is not the “real” West but is simply a modified, western extension of the East coast. Here begins the struggle with trying to define the West and its culture, particularly for writers attempting to create honest discourse about their western lives, themselves as westerners, and deciding how to situate themselves within the context of the many ideas and interpretations of the West.

An inherent problem exists for those who feel the urge to write about their lives spent in the West. Because of the role that landscape plays in western life, writers experience difficulty in exploring their experiences outside the Western context. Western writers who wish to talk about their lives in the context of the

region they grew up in must somehow describe that region and the landscapes within it. Unfortunately, in doing so the person who chooses to write a memoir or autobiography of his or her western life must succumb to the mythology of the West because once the West and its landscape are mentioned the writer is defined in terms of whatever mythological West the reader finds familiar. Female western writers have the most difficulty in writing their lives because the mythological West, a west that many people still believe in, is a masculine West that has no place for women to speak their voices.

While the dominant mythology of the West is a white masculine one of wilderness, machismo, and playing cowboy, there is room for new interpretations. Wallace Stegner illustrates the ever changing quality of the west, and its people, in stating that "the Westerner is less person than a continuing adaptation. The West is less a place than a process" ("Aesthetics" 2). In discovering their voice in the context of their own West, many western women autobiographers refuse to be objectified by a dying myth and struggle to make themselves part of the continuing adaptive process of the West. Mary Clearman Blew is one western writer who has managed to redefine the white masculinist myth of the West. While she does not hesitate to center herself as a western writer, Blew questions both the mythology surrounding her life and her place in it as a white western woman. What I wish to examine in this essay is the mythology surrounding the West and the white female autobiographer's place in it, using Mary Clearman Blew and her memoir *All But the Waltz* as my primary concern.

THE MYTH OF THE WEST

Fabricating Lives

Before examining Blew's memoir *All But the Waltz*, it is necessary to consider an interpretation of the mythologies surrounding the West and the implications this mythology has on all western writers and scholars, particularly female and minority ones. The mythologies of the West vary from person to person, time periods, and among different schools of thought. Most people, however, would not deny that many ideas surrounding the West and comprising what the "true" West is contribute to the mythology surrounding the area. As Roland Barthes points out, "[myth] is a mode of signification, a form" (109). Although scholars and residents of the West do not deny that there is a certain mythology maintained in the daily western lifestyle, the myth signifies something. Western mythology signifies a need for a past that has been long gone, for control that white westerners no longer have (if they ever did) over the land. Barthes explains that, "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones" (109). The object of the Western myth may be unclear but there is no limit to the way in which this myth can be conveyed. Movies and books keep the Old West alive and maintain the mythology that pervades the imagination of the 'true' West.

Because the West is historically not associated with culture and urbanization, "The West's claim to fame, its *raison d'être*, is as producer of nature, wilderness, and the 'natural man'" (Comer 63). The West's historical function as a wilderness, as a place where the "natural man" can be born and live happily, is instrumental in creating its mythology. Without history, myth cannot exist. Without myth, the West is simply another region; another place to live that maintains no particularly unique qualities. The double function of myth described by Barthes where it "[...] points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us" (113) is what causes westerners to realize that they are living a myth yet imposes such a specific idea of a way of life on them that they are unwilling to let go of the myth. As Will Wright notes, "A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths" (119). Westerners, at least those who buy into the mythology, need the myth of the West in order to feel that there is significance to the idea of the historically independent, self-realized American image. The mythology of the West also provides a way for white men who believe in it to function, to believe that they are independent and strong-willed, common ideals held as part of being an American. Myth provides a way to define history and create a reality from this history, allowing people in general to feel that this historical reality is somehow natural and is not just an explanation for "the way things are" but is a stated fact (Barthes 117). For instance, at one point in her memoir Blew discusses her experience in deciphering her great-grandfather Abraham's papers. Through his

random notes and scribbling, Blew determines that, like most westerners and western writers,

For this stranger in a strange desolate land, the cure for homesickness was to transform the wasteland into something more to his liking. [...] Abraham discovered that writing about the northern plains was another means of transforming them into space he could measure and control.
(28)_x

The need to transform the West into a controllable space is central to the mythology surrounding the region. Found in any narrative with landscape at its center is a “fantasy topography” and, as Comer describes, “The wilderness ideal is attractive because it enables readers and writers to generate alternative landscapes on which to enact the particular causes that drive their works” (147). *All But the Waltz* is, as one of Blew’s other works is entitled, “bone deep in landscape” but this does not necessarily indicate a need to control the land but rather indicates a purpose for it. Blew uses the landscape to situate herself as a westerner, to show that she is a part of it, but is not buying completely into the myth that dominates it.

What sets Western women, regardless of their race, apart from other American women is the fact that they, like Western men, have experienced the West, have lived in the shadow of its myth. Wallace Stegner notes that “The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long. It has no future in exploiting its setting either, for too consistently it has tried to substitute scenery for a society” (*Sound* 183). In not needing to further explore or perpetuate the myth of the West western women writers are able to find a voice, though not

always a communal one, and tell their own truths about what the West might be outside the dominant mythology.

Through her memoir, Blew is able to use her voice to tell her own view of what the West could be and what Montana means to her as a white western woman. Blew avoids succumbing entirely to the Western mythological tradition of the enduring pioneer woman that her mother and grandmothers, whether they realized it or not, became. By finding her voice through memoir, Blew is able to resist the dominant mythology of the West and is able to avoid the seemingly predestined role of white women in the West while maintaining her ties to the landscape. Like white western men, Blew is able to use the landscape to her advantage by describing it in detail which gives her credibility as a white female westerner. Unlike white western men, however, Blew does not seek to control the landscape but rather use it as a tool to critique the mythology that sought to control it.

WESTERN WOMEN'S MEMOIR

Discovering Memoir

Stegner indicates that western writers have long been searching for a suitable vocabulary with which to express themselves ("Aesthetics" 2), and that in searching for this vocabulary they are also looking for a suitable genre of writing. While autobiography and memoir are not new genres of writing, they are a fairly recent publishing development for western women writers within the last thirty or forty years. Carolyn Heilbrun discusses the autobiographical literary studies of James Olney who,

[...] in a book published in 1972, took the maleness of autobiography for granted. [...] It did not occur to him that half the human race did not share, in the way he described, in 'the human condition.' For women, their 'condition' was female rather than human (17).

The idea of the 'female' condition is significant in that women's life experiences are, typically, different from men's. For women, in this case western women, the need to share their experiences in an honest and telling way is significant in helping them define who they are and what role they play within the dominant culture.

Although men dominated the genre of autobiographical writing, many women took it upon themselves to create their own interpretation of the genre, an easy thing to do since there is no 'grand narrative' for the autobiography, no set of standardized

rules, no definition of "truth" that operates in any given historical context (Smith 45). However, because women began publishing autobiographical writing fairly recently in literary history it is important to examine the turn that contemporary women's autobiography has taken. Gone are the stifled, unsubstantial works of repressed women. In contemporary women's memoirs, Heilbrun points out two generalizations. The first is that the writer typically does not begin writing her memoirs until she has reached middle age. The second is that the memoir is written in an outspoken way, detailing rebellious experiences and providing "[...] sudden, dazzling recognition of too-easily accepted female servitude with a forthrightness unthinkable two decades ago" (23). Significantly, women autobiographers are writing and publishing in a style that was not possible or even attempted thirty years ago. In contemporary autobiography, women are able to talk about themselves in the way they see themselves, they are able to describe their families, surroundings, and lives with as much candor as they desire. As Benstock remarks, "in the word 'autobiography,' writing mediates the space between 'self' and 'life'" (7).

Women are able to investigate the relationship between who they are and the lives they are living through autobiographical writing as they never were authorized to before. Lillian Smith, a white novelist from the South who, in 1962, investigated the reason that no woman had written a great autobiography provides an example to understand the lack of substance in early women's autobiography. Stating that women did not dare tell the truth about themselves because of the change that would take place in the male psychology (meaning that men might be shocked to learn the

truth about some women's lives), Smith claimed that women conspired to keep the truth to themselves. Heilbrun acknowledges the correctness of Smith's statements but points out that Smith had failed to mention the importance of the "degree to which women had internalized the 'facts' dictated to them by male psychology" (21). While Smith's research was obviously considerable for its time, it fails to delve deeper into the problems faced by women, particularly young women in writing an account of their lives. At a more mature age, women are able to put aside any care they might have for the male psyche and concentrate on who they are and what they have to say. By acknowledging the independence found in mature women autobiographers we can see the change that has taken place in women's autobiography.

For western women autobiographers in general, perhaps the most significant thing that even the most "traditional" contemporary western women writers have managed to avoid is writing the classical Western book. Will Wright explains that, "The classical Western is the prototype of all Westerns [...] It is the story of the lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm" (123). Wright further explains that a typical group of characters in the classical Western would include a lone gunfighter, homesteaders, and a rancher. The classical Western does not present "equally valid, conflicting life-styles" but instead relies on stereotypical binary oppositions of different combinations of the same group of characters (121-122). Because of the nature of their texts, western women writers avoid writing the classical western text,

sometimes narrowly, because they are exploring and creating new facets of the mythologies of the West rather than perpetuating them.

Although Mary Clearman Blew's memoir *All But the Waltz* has elements of the classical Western, primarily the story of her great-grandfather Abraham's arrival and life in Montana, Blew's book is a convincing representation of the power western women writers have to change and redefine the myth of the West. Her memoir is significant because it opens itself up to a new interpretation of the West and acknowledges that "[...] memory leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story; experience itself is mediated by the ways we describe and interpret it to others and ourselves [...]" (Smith 35). Blew never insists that her interpretation is the only 'correct' one, simply a new one for the western myth. It is clear that memoir allows Blew the opportunity to speak openly and as honestly as possible about her experiences. The memoir is a genre of autobiography that calls for confession, for memory, for honesty, yet leaves room to, as Blew does, question the voice and memories contained within the text.

Finding a Voice Within a White Masculine Myth

Western women writers are increasingly at an advantage and a disadvantage simultaneously when they begin writing their own stories. Initially, associating oneself with a region would not seem to be a problem for any writer, to become a 'niche' writer, per se. However, to associate oneself with the West creates numerous

problems, primarily for female writers. Even with the increasing modernization of the West, many white Americans refuse to see the West as a place of cultural or intellectual authority. And though, as Comer claims, "It is a commonplace of both western history and literary studies to note that the story of western settlement serves as the nation's founding myth. *The West is America* [...]" (5) once a writer is situated as a westerner, she will rarely have the opportunity to become anything else because the public's understanding of the mythological West does not save room for other interpretations. As Stegner points out,

[...] the western writer is in a box with booby traps at both ends [...] he has a hard time discovering what is in him wanting to be said, and that when he does discover it he has difficulty getting a hearing. His box is booby-trapped at one end by an inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition, and at the other end by the coercive dominance of attitudes, beliefs, and intellectual fads and manners destructive of his own (Sound 170).

Although Stegner assumes that the western writer is a white male and that he embodies some characteristics specific to the traditional idea of an innocent, untarnished westerner, his point that the western writer has difficulty in saying what he needs to say and getting someone to listen to it thoughtfully is pertinent to women writers as well. The lack of an artistic tradition leaves white female western writers searching for a way to express their ideas and experiences, which often becomes fiction or autobiography. Thus, in needing to tell the "truth" about their lives, about what the West is for them, white female western autobiographers are forced to challenge themselves and their readers to develop a new understanding and interpretation of the West, and perhaps create their own mythologies.

The challenge facing western female autobiographers begins with the need to determine their own identity within the identity of the region they call home. The historical identity of the West and of westerners is culturally determined by an anti-urban bias. Stereotypically, white western men do not want their region to become urbanized for in doing so they will lose the ruggedness with which they associate themselves. For white western men, the West, like women and nature, is something to be taken over and controlled, to keep as a space rather than a place. Spaces are masculine, place is viewed by the male onlooker as pure, virginal, home, and female (Comer 56). This primarily white masculine view and understanding of the West causes problems for female western writers who are trying to provide their own interpretation of the West.

The western female writer who wants to address her life, her home, her *place*, must figure out how to do so while being caught or stereotyped in a masculinized mythology. As Comer points out, the idea of region depends on the presence of women and minorities for its perception as a white male discourse (9). The West is constructed as a space by white males by shunning urbanization, by reveling in tales of the lone wanderer, by valuing nature as a controllable entity that exists for solitude and ruggedness. The home, the 'little house on the prairie' is valued as a place to return to for only a brief time, a feminized place where there is no room to roam. If the West is understood as a white masculine discourse, it becomes apparent that western women writers lack a true space in which to situate themselves. If a female western writer wants to be taken seriously, to have her story read as an intellectual

text and enjoy national, rather than regional, recognition and cultural acceptance, she must “[...] eschew the designation ‘western.’ But faced with the alternative of being rendered spaceless, better to be a female, invalid writer heralded by northeastern intellectuals than to be no (western) writer at all” (Comer 30). In order for western women writers to avoid the fate of becoming an invalid eastern writer, which is perhaps in itself a rather melodramatic view of the plight faced by white female writers, they must engage themselves with their landscape, with the mythology they are surrounded by, and create for themselves their own representation of the public sphere.

If western women writers, through their memoirs especially, can create their own place they can “[...] write themselves into dominant western history at the same time that they change the conditions and values that enable “official” history to be known and told”(Comer 29). This being the case, the female western writer can create her own space, her own history, and her self within the context of the western myth and, perhaps, break out of that myth completely or create counter-myths instead. Although Blew problematizes much of western mythology, she also assumes that there is such a thing as ‘true’ nature, that rural landscapes are still at the center of the western experience and “[...]that western women endure, stoically”(Comer 140). In this assumption, Blew both breaks down and perpetuates western mythology. While she realizes that, “[Abraham’s] vision, like [her] father’s was linear; it ruled out the faces on the margins or at the shrunken end of his perspective, and one of those faces was [hers]”(Blew 36), Blew also recognizes that she too is in the deep end

of the mythology that pervades her father's life. Blew's (and the reader's) realization that she is entrapped in Western mythology causes one to question the authenticity of a memoir, of a self, that is written while surrounded by myth. However, in Blew's case, she is aware and critical of both the myth that surrounds her life and the one she creates by writing about it.

Blew is surrounded by white masculine western mythology that takes expansion and "ownership" of the land for granted, but "[...] because she is also a woman, her claim to subjectivity is not certain. It can be challenged by male (in this case, her father's) authority" (Comer 227). Blew must face this risk of challenge in telling her story and redefining the western myth. Her father has raised her and her sister as sons who are as good with horses, stock, and ranch business as any boy in the area. Blew's father challenges her memory, and she acquiesces with the statement, "How can I trust memory, which slips and wobbles and grinds its erratic furrows like a bald-tired truck fighting for traction on a wet gumbo road?" (Blew 4). However, in acknowledging that perhaps her father is right in questioning her memory of the sow and her babies being trapped by the river, Blew takes ownership of her narrative and decides, "Whether or not I dreamed her, the sow in the river is my story. She is what I have saved, up there on her pinnacle where the river roils" (11). By taking ownership of both her narrative and her memories, Blew acknowledges that she may have her own interpretation of the West, may be creating her own mythology, that "The myth has its grip on us all" (Blew 55), but this time it is *her* myth combined with the traditional white masculine view.

Finding a Self Through Memoir

In order for western women writers to construct themselves as both westerners and writers with significant messages, they must have the “[...] desire to ‘remap’ or ‘respatialize’ the West, this time with a feminist, antiracist, and often post-nationalist logic” (Comer 9). Through autobiography and memoir, white western women writers can tell their “real” stories and thus alter the mythology of the West. Though they understand that “the autobiographical text is, after all, a self-representational artifact, not the self itself” (Smith 38), through their stories, western women writers are able to take on and challenge western stereotypes. While fiction and poetry are also valid genres making changes in the field of “western” literature, western women who tell their own stories, and those of their families, are able to “[...] deploy representations of western lands and nature to talk about and, more, to challenge and change myriad *social and political* topics: the qualities and compromises of women’s lives [...]” (Comer 11). An important part of Comer’s point is the need for women to address political and social topics. Part of challenging stereotypes is to create a place for people who do not fit the mold of a dominant mythology.

As noted earlier, the West may be considered the epitome of America but it is a part of America that has no real room or place for women, white women and minority women, in its mythology. While this paper makes claims for all western women autobiographers, non-white western women are faced with even greater

challenges, at times, than are white women in telling their stories. And though as Stegner, seeking a coherent regional identity, says

As a westerner, I would love to believe that there is some spirit, attitude, faith, experience, tone, something, that binds all small-western stories together as manifestation of a coherent regional culture (Sound 187)

it is merely a *hope*, not necessarily a possibility. Regardless of the lack of a coherent racial identity, and though not all western women writers have the same voice, the fact that they are women and are able to finally write about themselves and their lives gives them the solidarity of a coherent culture. Shari Benstock observes, “[...] female autobiographers are more aware of their ‘otherness.’ Like men, we are subjected to the phallic law, but our experience of its social and political effects comes under the terms of another law—that of gender” (8) and therefore, writing about one’s life has significance separate from socio-political concerns.

An examination of western women’s autobiography leads one to focus on the process from which the autobiography is created, the formation of a self. Autobiographers have permission to represent themselves and their lives in any way they deem suitable, an idea that extends to western women’s memoir as well. The idea of the West as a myth allows western women writers to situate themselves within any context they wish and also allows them to tell whatever truths they wish. Sidonie Smith points to the fact that critics of women’s autobiography look for specific lived examples of the ‘real’ experiences described in the narrative, that “this experience is of two kinds, the specific lived experience of the actual woman, the autobiographer

whose name appears on the title page, as well as the shared experience of a commonality termed 'women'" (37). In their memoirs, western women recount their own experiences but also use their voices to speak for all the other western women who have not written their lives. The telling of their own stories as well as those of others puts women autobiographers at risk of having their "truths" questioned by readers and critics alike. However, as Blew demonstrates, the memoir leaves room to question "truths," both personal and cultural. As Benstock notes, "The initiatory gesture of each text is one of remembering" (10) not necessarily dispensing grand truths.

REDEFINING MYTH

Telling Truths

Reading any autobiographical text, be it memoir, autobiography, or diary, presents a situation where the truth of the author's words must be questioned. Memory and perception are not always reliable, particularly in a situation where many people are involved, but writing down what we *believe* to be the truth is as close to telling the "truth" as most can ever come. As soon as a writer chooses to rediscover her experiences and memories she enters into a "complex web of intertextualities" (Smith 42). Remembering oneself as who one was as a child and knowing oneself in their present state are only two of the many selves an autobiographer must contextualize. As women, a socially constructed designation itself, white western women autobiographers are subject to the "truths" and subjectivities of that role. They are subjected to understanding the "truths" that come with being situated as a westerner and those that are "inherent" or stereotypical of being a western woman.

The white western woman autobiographer must determine who she is and who she wants to be in writing her autobiography she must be conscious of herself as a woman, as a westerner, as a person, and as a voice. By relating her experience through autobiography, the writer is able to translate it, thus making it truthful. As Smith relates,

In salvaging the "truth" of her "experience," the autobiographer might seek to unearth or unmask her "true" self, that unique "self" uncontaminated by the falsehoods, "half-truths," the "untruths," that her culture would foist off as the universalized "truth" of "female experience" and "female identity" (37-38).

Western women autobiographers, like Mary Clearman Blew, are able to define what the "truth" is for them and that is what counts in their autobiographies. Confessional stories, diaries, memoirs, any type of autobiographical discourse can be questioned for its "authenticity" but whether we believe in the "truths" told in these autobiographical forms or not, it remains significant that a new point of view beyond the conventional white masculine discourse, though it may not be outside myth, is being related.

In memoir writers must choose which fictions to believe, which to disbelieve, and which to disprove. Because the myth of the west is a white masculine one, western women writers are obliged to decide which of their memories are their own and which are created by the dominant culture. Shari Benstock explains her understanding of the development of "truth" and "self" in the autobiography in that

[...] autobiographical writing—whatever form it takes—questions notions of selfhood rather than taking self for granted. [...] Like autobiography, which slips in and out of genre definitions, self is both culturally constituted *and* composed of all that culture would erase (12).

By understanding their personal "truths" western women autobiographers are able to question their selfhood as well as construct it anew, if necessary.

In *All But the Waltz* Mary Clearman Blew does not necessarily question who she is because, like Heilbrun's generalizations exemplify, she is at a more mature age and is able to discuss her life, memories, and experiences with surprising clarity and frankness. Blew does explore the relationships in her family and how she fits within those contexts. Through memoir, rather than a confessional autobiography, Blew is able to examine more than her internal feelings and self. She is able to examine her family, the landscape that surrounds her, the West, and in doing so question the mythology with which she has grown up. Because she constantly questions her memory, admitting that there are "holes" in her understanding of her family and her life experiences, Blew knows that she is not necessarily setting the record straight but is, instead, making a change in the way that Montana and the West and the white women who live there are perceived. Blew's story could be the story of any young woman in similar circumstances growing up in Montana and because of this she is able to act as a voice for anyone who would allow her to. By telling her own version of the "truth," Blew is not to be questioned in her narrative as authentic or inauthentic but, as all western female autobiographers can, "[...]become agents for autobiographical change in a double sense. They change their own lives and they change the discursive regime of autobiographical 'truth' itself" (Smith 46). By situating herself as a westerner, a Montanan, and an outsider in the context of her family, Blew manages to convince an audience to listen to her story as she redefines the myth of the West.

Creating a Place

Krista Comer makes an interesting point that in conventional mythology the West is regarded as a blank slate on which white westerners can write their own interpretations of the region and, with this idea comes “[...] a love of rurality and wild country overlapping with Indian fetish, the possibility of innocence or redemption, and representations of woman as nature” (147-48). While Blew’s narrative does display a love of rurality, or perhaps simply takes rurality for granted, it does not bother with the other conventions Comer mentions; Blew is aware of Abraham’s racism toward Indians, and she does not represent the women in her family as “natural” earth mothers but as the figures she sees daily. The western *tabula rasa*, for Blew then, is the possibility that she can redefine it, show a new perspective. Although Blew’s narrative is unmistakably western it is not the same western identity that would be had by her father or other white men.

As Comer correctly states, *All But the Waltz* “[...] makes all the initial tropic gestures of a canonical western American story. Until, that is, it announces itself as also female. The minute this announcement comes, this all-American tale problematizes its claim to center stage and ‘reality’” (226). Blew leaves no room for readers to see her memoir as a grand narrative of the West, and though her story is not necessarily unique in and of itself, the fact that it is centered in Montana, in the West, and that Blew maintains a constant awareness of the mythology she distains makes it

noteworthy in seeking to change the mythologies of the West. Blew questions whether her father's

[...] fiction reading offered a pattern for his sense of himself, or a mirror. But so strongly did he believe in a mythic Montana of the past, of inarticulate strength and honor and courage irrevocably lost, that I cannot escape the conviction that a conscious choice shaped the way he died (45).

Her realization of her father's love for and perhaps sentimentality for the old West of his youth, of "[...] that romantic and despairing mythology which has racked and scarred the lives of so many men and women in the West" (Blew 45) allows Blew to remain critical of the mythology yet maintain her centeredness within the landscape with which she grew up. Comer describes Blew's primary conflict within the narrative as what her father loves, "[...] cowboy culture and mythology—is that which Blew despises" (228). This conflict causes Blew to determine the path she will take in her life. Seeing the strength that her mother and grandmothers displayed, as well as the hardships they endured, Blew chooses not to succumb to her father's myth and instead, leaves the ranch life for the intellectual life, while all the time her father rages that she got something in her head that she knows something but that she "don't know a goddamned thing" (Blew 36).

Blew's decision to appropriate the intellectual life is her only way to escape from participating in the western myth. By adopting "Eastern values" not valued by her father like higher education and college instruction and taking hold of her own life and sexuality, she is still entangled within the myth because she chooses to write about her life and situate herself within a western landscape but it is the myth on her

terms. As de Certeau points out, “[...] users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (485). Blew’s *bricolage*, her “poetic ways of ‘making do’” (486) is her ability to write about the West and her place in it without allowing the landscape and sense of place to determine who she is. By writing about the West in her own terms, Blew ingeniously makes use of the dominant white male discourse and reappropriates “the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (486).

Blew’s father is like the lone gunfighter hero that Will Wright describes, in that he belongs solely to the West and has no association with the Eastern ideals of culture and education; “the Western hero is felt to be good and strong because he is involved with the pure and noble wilderness, not with the contaminating civilization of the East” (Wright 133). Blew faces a conflict with her father because he associates her desire to go to graduate school and teach as an association with the East. But she has to do this because in order for her to not be marginalized or seen as a ‘hero’ in her Western culture, she has to act like a boy and shun “eastern” values like education. So, like the noisy Hutterites who “unwittingly violated the code of the West every time they drew a breath of prairie air” (Blew 83), Blew violates her father’s code of the West by adapting ‘eastern’ ideals. By adapting these “eastern” ideals, Blew provides herself with a space from which to speak her mind on the mythological West. As Stegner says, “The western writer should go away and get his eyes opened, and then look back” (*Sound* 183). By adopting patently “eastern” practices and

attended college, graduate school, and then moved away, Blew was able to look back on her life and critically examine the mythology that surrounded her upbringing.

Because she is able to reflect on her experiences from a distance, Blew does not see the life and hardships of the cowboy as romantic but instead sees cowboys and their mythology as damaging. Interestingly, Blew does not fully critique the white male vision of the West but instead shows that, no matter what happens, the women of the West are not forced to succumb to it. Comer believes that Blew's point in her memoir, "[...] is to demonstrate the visionless legacy that all of these fallen cowboys hand on to the women in their lives. Women inherit a world where, even if fathers and husbands give up, the women carry on" (229). I would argue, however, that this "special message" is not necessarily what Blew is looking to provide in her text. If it were, the idea that "the women carry on" would be continuing the grand narrative of the stoic pioneer woman who carries on no matter what. While this image is accurate in many cases, it is not the only correct depiction of white Western women. Blew's point, I would argue, is that white western men, particularly the ones in her life, are entrapped within a myth that they cannot escape from and that, even though the myth has its grasp on all westerners, regardless of race, in some way or another, it is up to women to provide new voices, new perspectives, and new interpretations of that myth in order to perhaps escape from it or perhaps be included in it on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

Blew's memoir is not simply the story of her life or a new version of the Western myth. Could she have chosen not to situate herself within the context of the landscape but instead concentrate only on people? Or is she, as many westerners are, tied to and inseparable from her surroundings? She could possibly have never situated herself in Montana, focusing entirely on the relationships within her family, and never situating herself as a westerner. The result, however, would not have been the same. Being a westerner, whether one submits to the great Myth or not, is about being part of the landscape. As Comer points out,

[...] Blew invokes the landscapes of particular places in order both to locate her western story as well as put into motion a narrative of nation [and] does so while at the same time disturbing the link between the nation and territorial boundedness. In the final analysis, however, Blew does not simply reinvent a classic, but now feminized, "American moment" upon Montana's western lands [...] Blew's nationalist narrative ends up far more open, diffuse, and spatially deconstructed (224).

Blew's narrative remains open and diffuse at the end because no end exists for the West. She is not attempting to draw conclusions about the fate of the West or its mythology but is simply opening up new doors for people other than white males to create and understand their own myths.

Mythology is not always wrong or incorrect but, as Barthes points out, is a culture's way of making sense of history, of creating a natural reality. Although, as Blew states, "It is curious that westerners, so tolerant of the eccentric, the loner, or

the crazed [...] can simultaneously harbor such dread of cultural difference—although perhaps it is inevitable that westerners, made up entirely of displacers, should fear displacement” (89-90). Perhaps this fear of displacement has not allowed room for other interpretations of the myth of the West. With this fear in mind, perhaps narratives like Blew’s will show that there is always room for new interpretations of myth, particularly Western myth. For, though situating oneself as a westerner can be problematic, few subjectivities are as open to interpretation as that one.

Memoir is important, especially for white Western women writers because, “We all have the obligation to be ourselves even when it seems we are squares” (Stegner Sound 184). Contemporary Western female autobiographers are a new generation in the genre of autobiography and, as such, are the hope for other western women who are subject to the white masculine myth of the West. As Heilbrun reminds us,

The new women autobiographers will probably be the first real mothers of achieving, self-realized women in the history of the world. It is a sobering thought, and one which reveals how new and revolutionary a form we are considering (30).

Women like Mary Clearman Blew are exposing the myth of the West for what it is and can be: an incomplete story that needs to include new voices and new ‘truths.’ In writing their memoirs, these women autobiographers are creating a space for new memories and stories of lives lived in the West where there never existed one before. For, in the Old West, the myth of the cowboy means certain death. Perhaps in the

New West the myth of the western woman, whoever she may be, will create a new type of life. The stoic, pioneering spirit with a modern attitude is alive and well in the West and Blew's memoir acknowledges and celebrates it with an honesty and integrity that helps provide a blueprint for western women writers to be honest with themselves and their readers. This honesty will not dispel the myth of the West but will, as Blew's memoir has, create a broader, more inclusive discourse.

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