

STEPPING FROM THE SHADOW OF THE COWBOY MYTH

An Exploration of Why Women Raised in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region  
Bond with the Land, Break from the Land, and Write about the Land

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Critical Paper and Program Bibliography  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the MFA (Master of Fine Arts)  
in Creative Writing, Pacific Lutheran University, August 2009.

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I. Introduction

The states comprising the northern Rocky Mountain region – Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho – share commonalities of demographics, socioeconomics, industry, geography and weather. For more than a century, the majority of the region’s inhabitants have depended upon the land for survival, primarily through “irrigated farming, mining, ranching, and at least some timber harvest. Increasingly, their economy has turned toward tourism” (McFarland 6). These five states also share a commonality of women contemporaries who have published memoirs about coming of age in the northern Rocky Mountain region between 1945-1975. As children they formed a strong attachment to their native ground; in young adulthood they abandoned that ground and pursued lives of the mind rather than lives on the land, as their families did; and, years later, they wrote about the childhood landscapes that “shaped, scarred and strengthened” them (Barnes and Blew, *Circle* ix). The women’s shared experiences raise questions including: What is it about the western landscapes of their girlhoods that entrenched itself in their bodies, spirits, memories and senses? What is it about that land that led them, as young women, to abandon it, inflicting deep and long-lasting pain on themselves and the loved ones they left behind? What causes them to identify their native ground as their first home, to grieve its loss, and to write about its continued hold over them?

In the following pages, I will explore these questions by examining the lives of three authors who were born and raised on isolated, fourth-generation ranches in the northern Rocky Mountain region: Mary Clearman Blew, who was raised on a cattle ranch in central Montana; Judy Blunt, who lived as both daughter and wife on cattle and wheat ranches in eastern Montana; and Teresa Jordan, whose family operated a cattle ranch in southeastern Wyoming. These three women left their native ground by choice or by force, and, years later, wrote memoirs that chronicle “what might be called uncolonizing, coming to terms with century-old illusions about wringing prosperity from the high dry plains” (Doig X6). I will also explore these questions through works by other regional writers, as well as through my own childhood story of moving in 1977 to northwest Montana, where my family built a log house on twenty-one wooded acres abutting the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness. Finally, I will discuss how the memoirs by Blew, Blunt and Jordan closed a second phase of western writing, and will explore the ways in which my story, and the stories being told by a new wave of women writers, contribute to a third phase of regionalist writing that reflects the West’s shift from a mythic past to a modern future.

*Knowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are.*

~Paul Shepard

## II. Why Women Bond with the Land

The power of place is universal; it grabs hold of us no matter where the plot of ground we call our childhood home. Scott Russell Sanders writes that it was on his family farm in Ohio where, as a boy, he “first stumbled upon a few of life’s great mysteries” and formed a deep attachment to the land (Sanders, *Landscapes* 199). According to Sanders, this grip of land on heart and mind begins and strengthens as children coming to consciousness explore their physical world. In his essay “After the Flood,” Sanders describes this powerful, primal landscape as being the place where,

since before you had words for such knowledge, you have known the smells, the seasons, the birds and beasts, the human voices, the houses, the ways of working, the lay of the land and the quality of light. It is the landscape you learn before you retreat inside the illusion of your skin... love it or hate it, you cannot shake free. Even if you move to the antipodes, even if you become intimate with new landscapes, you still bear the impression of that first ground. (Sanders, *Landscapes* 201)

Four decades have passed since Sanders’ boyhood farm was flooded to create a dam and reservoir, yet the drowned land remains a potent force in his memory and a persistent theme in his writing.

Like Sanders, Blew, Blunt and Jordan became aware of their own existence, thoughts, senses and understanding on the land where they were raised, in the northern Rocky Mountain region of the western United States. Born into ancestral bloodlines anchored by turn-of-the-century homesteaders, the girls grew up on remote, windswept ranchland that infiltrated their bodies and lodged in their bones. All three women describe their native ground and define their visceral relationship to it with words and images that merge body and earth. The story of Blunt's first days "is embedded in the stories of the land" (12). Blew writes of her native ground: "I feel as though I have been imprinted from birth by that landscape. Often I can see its low mountains, grasslands, buttes, and river against the backs of my closed eyes like the lingering effect of looking at the sun" (*Circle* 376). She locates the roads, fence lines, bluffs and river of her childhood "not so much spatially, geographically, as internally, as I might slowly recognize a map of my own arteries" (*Waltz* 21). Jordan equates her Wyoming ranchland with being as critical to her survival as water. To quench her thirst out on the range, Jordan's father "had taught me to put a small stone in my mouth. It gave the tongue something to work on and thirst would magically disappear [...] I once dreamt that my teeth were made of stones and it was a comforting dream, as if the font of everything I needed, water and land, was right inside my mouth" (12).

The rough stone Jordan worried with her tongue offered reassurance that she possessed the resources she needed; it also symbolized a larger association, that she possessed "some direct connection to both the land and the events that transpired upon it" (12). Her desire to be linked to her native ground and feel that her presence mattered is inherent, according to Sanders, who says this desire "arises from sources deeper than

narcissism. It arises from our need to be at home on the earth. We marry ourselves to the creation by knowing and cherishing a particular place..." (*Landscapes* 211). We form an internal connection to the land to anchor and orient ourselves, to establish immediate boundaries in an endless, unknowable world, and to create a reassuring sense that we belong and are accepted.

Jordan's connection to the land made her feel integral to each day's events as they unfolded; it also grounded her in her body: "Here, physical exertion matters. It keeps me aware of what it means to be alive, and what it costs" (112). Other women who write about the West have found that the western landscape instills in them emotional and psychological equanimity. In the following passage author Kim Barnes, who came to consciousness in an isolated logging camp in Idaho, explains the inner balance she encounters amid familiar wilderness terrain: "I recognize and understand the nature of this landscape's demands. Rather than finding the West dominating and threatening, I most often find it a sure comfort and familiarity. Recognition. A stable and monogamous marriage of need, expectation, and fulfillment" (Barnes, *Landscapes* 15).

My connection to the wilderness in northwest Montana, especially the acres surrounding our log house that I explored alone for hours, is similar to Barnes' experience: I didn't feel threatened or overpowered by the wilderness. To paraphrase Sanders, wilderness didn't frighten me; it soothed me (*Staying Put* 56). At five years old, I had been sexually abused at a daycare in Butte, Montana. My parents were unaware that the abuse had occurred. My family moved to northwest Montana in 1977, when I was seven, and it was in the isolated woods that I found safe harbor and felt protected. I disappeared deep into the tree-crowded hills where no one could find me. My emotional

self had gone numb, and the woods allowed me to feel through my senses (rough bark, sharp stones, frigid snow and water that stung my skin). The woods grounded me in my body: I had to struggle physically to defend or extract myself from dangerous situations. I released suppressed anger when I wrestled with the extremes land and weather dished out, and felt at peace when the environment was quiet and calm. Adults were grasping and couldn't be trusted; the land was guileless and demanded nothing of me.

We bond with the land because it is the primal ground where we come to consciousness and because we desire to feel at home on the earth. Our families also serve as a powerful impetus for us to embrace the land. Children learn early and implicitly what they must do to remain connected to and accepted by their parents, the two people they depend upon most for protection and survival. In the introduction to *Circle of Women*, Barnes and Blew identify the values their ancestors handed down and that they absorbed at a young age: "As children, we heard stories about the hardships of coming to live in the West and the sacrifices of staying here. Devotion to landscape and lifestyle, we understood, counted for more than comfort or security" (ix). Blew, Blunt and Jordan hail from ranching families that wrung a living from the land for four generations. Their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents toiled in "country so harsh and wild and distant that it must grow its own replacements, as it grows its own food, or it will die" (Blunt 3). Human survival demanded absolute dedication by each member of the family and the production of successive generations to help shoulder the unrelenting load. Children of ranchers adopted their parents' sense of urgency to subdue the land and withstand its battering because their parents' way of life, self identity and pride (especially their fathers') were at stake, as was their ability to provide food and shelter for

their offspring. Familial love, protection and provision became entwined with place. To refuse to help shoulder the burden of land would threaten the stability of the family unit and the success of its chief enterprise, and endanger the child's physical well-being and the emotional safety and security the family bond provided.

When my family moved to northwest Montana, I developed an earnest devotion to landscape and lifestyle. The implicit understanding I absorbed from my parents was that they had taken a big risk: they had sold their home in Butte, sold their co-ownership of a hardware store, quit their jobs, sunk all of their money in land, boxed up and stored our material comforts, and sketched floor plans for a log home they would build from scratch without prior experience. We all had to buy into the dream if we were to succeed. It was my father's dream, primarily. My mother told me decades later: "Your dad, being the kind of man he is, wanted this kind of life: living in the wilderness, hunting. Because he wanted it, I wanted it. He took us with him on this adventure." My parents were financially, emotionally and physically invested in their twenty-one acres; from 1977 onward our family narrative would be rooted in and shaped by the land. Because I was a child, and perhaps because of the sexual abuse, I held a deep need for relational connection with my parents and a need to feel safe. I could earn both by helping to build our home: I could clear brush, peel bark from logs, stack firewood and haul water from the river for our baths and dish washing. For those tasks I was too small and weak to undertake, I could help by staying out of the way and not getting into mischief. My parents were carving a new life from the land, a life that promised a place for me if I did my part.

Children become tied to the land through their ties to family, and also through the homes in which they live. Blew and Jordan lived in homes built by their great-grandfathers; Blunt was raised in a house on ranchland her parents had bought from a retired homesteader. These homes anchored the girls' primal ground and influenced their coming to consciousness. My childhood home did so as well, yet I think my connection to the land was deepened further because I grew up helping my family build our home. Sanders observes in *Staying Put* that "so few of us build our own homes, we forget that our dwellings, like our bodies, are made from the earth" (26). He points to the humans who settled the West, first Native Americans then white pioneers, who held a keen awareness of the connection between shelter and earth because they had wrapped themselves in the land: Indians built huts with bark and teepees with tanned hides; some pioneers camped inside hollow trees while they built their log homes. Sanders explains that when a family "moved into the cabin, they merely exchanged life inside a single tree to life inside a stack of them. The bark on the walls and the clay in the chinks and the fieldstone in the chimney reminded them of whence their shelter had come [...] Nature does not halt at the property line" (*Staying Put* 27).

My family built our home by hand, piece by piece, over a span of two decades. During the first summer we dug a hole in the earth for the basement, which would be our shelter for the next three years. We worked on finishing the basement while the sun dried felled, limbed larch trees my father had rolled onto wood-pole racks he had built. The second summer our dirt yard disappeared beneath mounds of bark we scraped from the dried trees. Each day the log walls of our home grew higher, then log purlins were laid across the walls to support a ceiling of tongue-and-groove pine. At night, rain drummed

on the metal roof that sloped over my bed and in the morning, before rising, I traced star and moon constellations in the knots and worm-wriggled divots on the log purlin that passed overhead. As my family labored to build our house, the materials we used were tacit reminders that our shelter came from the earth; when the house was finished enough for us to move to the main floor, we found shelter and sanctuary within its treed walls. We lived wrapped in the land. My childhood stake to place pierced through family and home and pinned me to solid ground.



Author Krista Comer states of Blew's memoir *All but the Waltz* that "there is something profoundly secure about the narrative's claim to the land, something unshakable, (ostensibly) earned, certain" (225). Blew's taut connection between place and self, Comer says, is partly what enables her to write about her childhood landscape so ably and beautifully. The following is a central passage from *All but the Waltz* in which Blew renders her deep bond with her ancestral ranchland:

I am bone-deep in landscape. In this dome of sky and river and undeflected sunlight [...] I can almost feel my body, blood and breath in the broken line of the bluffs and the pervasive scent of ripening sweet clover and dust, almost feel the sagging fence line of ancient cedar posts stapled across my vitals. (7)

Blew's word choice creates a vivid image of the depth and breadth of her attachment to place: she links her body to the dome of sky, the far-off bluffs, the scented air that surrounds her. The phrases "bone-deep in landscape" and "posts stapled across my vitals" convey that her connection is primal and intimate. Blew's prose portrays a physical self

immersed in pastoral beauty. But the image is also troubling: it alludes to an invasive, acute emotional pain inflicted by the “magnet pull of place” (21). Blew articulates her ambivalence about her native ground when she writes, “I feel a kind of aversion, in that the human cost of that landscape, in terms of hopes and lives, displacement and loneliness, has been so high” (*Circle* 376). Her aversion is shared by Blunt and Jordan, as well as by other women writers who were raised in the West. As much as these women valued land and family, they chose to pursue adult lives that are worlds apart from the ranching tradition. The magnet pull of primal ground is strong; the magnet pull of self-identity is stronger still.

*And the day came when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful  
than the risk it took to blossom.*

~Anais Nin

### III. Why Women Break from the Land

The western landscape women writers loved in childhood is the very landscape many of them relinquished in early adulthood. Why did these women call on the values they had gained from their native ground – toughness, determination, self-reliance, courage – to snap ties with the land and with their families? For authors Blew, Blunt and Jordan, the simple answer is that they left home to attend college. But the forces that compelled them to break the confines of endless fences to pursue higher education are more complex. The predominant forces that led to the three women’s departures are an unyielding patriarchy of family and patrimony of land, the emergence of harsh economic realities, and a dying cowboy mythology. When change threatens steadfast western worldviews and inherited ways of life, tensions arise, conflicts erupt, and connection-breaking choices are made by women caught in the crux.

As a young girl growing up on her parents’ eastern-Montana ranch, Judy Blunt asserted her innate sense of belonging and connection to place when she stood atop her favorite rock at the edge of a wheat field and, with arms spread east and west, “claimed my legacy of land, shouting that this part would be mine – my land, my cattle grazing the green lip of the reservoir there, my meadowlarks, my grasshoppers. It seemed impossible to have grown any larger than I had been that afternoon” (207). Like other ranchers’ daughters, Blunt had seen her father and grandfather stake ownership of vast tracts of

prairie they had fenced and fields they had tilled, and she assumed their “legacy of land” would one day be hers. She learned that claiming her legacy would be impossible when her grandfather died and the ranch was sold to Blunt’s father and uncle. Her father, sharing the news of the sale with his children, made it clear to his daughters that the land would pass into the hands of his sons. For Blunt, this stark realization forever linked her grandfather’s death with “another small death, the day I discovered that as a girl, I would never own my childhood ranch” (210).

Blunt set out to fight her proscribed gendered role and went to extreme lengths throughout childhood and adolescence to extricate herself from her mother’s interior kitchen domain and insinuate herself into her father’s exterior domain of horse corrals and expansive prairies. The ranching culture’s “concurrent assumptions about patriarchy and patrimony” (Blew, *Waltz* 36) resisted Blunt at every turn and rejected her outright the summer after she graduated from high school, when she “felt suddenly rootless, invisible in a way I had never known. Grown beyond my child’s role in the community, I did not yet fit in the adult world. I held no place of value on my family’s ranch [...] My options were as frightening as they were simple. I could marry, or I could leave” (204).

Blunt chose to marry a nearby rancher and long-time family friend, a choice that would allow her to establish a new place of value and pursue her desire to belong to the land. She flung herself into her duties as ranch wife and continued to seek “the status of outside work” (Bevis 221), all the while harboring a suppressed, mounting anger that access to her husband’s world remained forbidden. She continued to push for a stake in the land, a shared sense of ownership, and a singular self-identity by making requests such as being granted the power to sign bank drafts or being issued a small wage check,

in her own name, for the field work she did, until one day her husband's quiet resistance bloomed into rage and he warned her, "Don't think you're going to run this ranch" (279). In that moment, the truth hit Blunt with gut-twisting finality: "Old rules do not break; they simply stretch and snap back like a well-made fence" (279).

Blunt sought for more than a decade to succeed as a rancher's wife, even though she "would never own a square foot of land, a bushel of oats or a bum calf in my own name" (291). However, "in the end, I couldn't sleep. I quit eating. It wasn't enough" (8); she made the painful, difficult choice to divorce her husband, abandon the ranching life and move with her three children to Missoula, where, at the age of thirty-two, she enrolled as a freshman at the University of Montana. Sixteen years later, when her memoir, *Breaking Clean*, was published, Blunt countered reviewers who oversimplified her story: "They say, 'After countless humiliations, Judy Blunt escapes from this patriarchal nightmare.' But readers should see that the life was hard for me to leave. It's not a book about trying to escape the ranch. It's about a 13-year struggle to *stay*. I hope the book suggests the complexity of real life" (qtd. in Lightfoot).

Breaking ties with the land and her family freed Blunt to attend college and map a new life for herself; in contrast, Teresa Jordan was raised by college-educated parents who urged her to leave the family's Wyoming ranch and attend Colorado State University. Also unlike Blunt, Jordan's chief goal after earning her degree was to return to her family's ranch, which she "so much wanted for [her]self" (37). But this was not to be: in 1978, the year after Jordan graduated from college, her father put the ranch up for sale. Jordan's brother didn't want the ranch and Jordan, who lived under the same

patrimony of land as Blunt, couldn't have had the land even if she were male due to the stranglehold of financing:

Estate taxes were devastating – annual interest on the loan required to pay them exceeded the profit the ranch generated even during its best years. We might have sold part of it in order to keep the rest, but my father chose not to. Dividing the ranch would limit income as well; if I came back as an adult to participate in management, the resources would be spread thinner yet. (36)

Jordan's family ranch was one of hundreds throughout the West that have succumbed to the stark economic realities of modern-day ranching. Ranch after ranch in her Iron Mountain community has been sold to investors, oil companies, ranching corporations, and wealthy buyers wanting a rural retreat. Jordan says her family was "part of an exodus of around 13 million people who have left the land during my lifetime" (15). Those few who have fought to hang on, including Blunt's parents in Montana, have done so by incorporating their ranches, assuming larger leases, and falling into greater debt. These ranchers' efforts at self-preservation have left them "grubbing a marginal existence from marginal land, preserving the heart of the ranching tradition even as the lights of the community winked out around them" (Blunt 295).

Jordan had assumed since childhood that she would always be able to return to her family's ranch; after her father sold it, she struggled for years to forgive him even though she understood the necessity of the sale. Like Blunt, Jordan asserts that the reasons for letting go of the family ranch aren't as simple as they might first appear:

When my family tells the story of the ranch, we say we left because we had to – we could not afford to pay the estate taxes after my grandfather’s death. This is [...] only part of the story. My family left the land because for four generations we yearned to leave. We had lived in a culture that taught us that a professional life is more respectable than one tied to the land. This attitude shaped the decisions my family made, and it continues to shape the larger political and economic decisions, made by educators and policymakers far removed from the land, that affect the few who still hold on. (87-88)

Jordan’s father also figured in the multiple reasons why her family left the land: he was a recent widower; he no longer enjoyed ranching; he was plagued with health problems from old injuries; and he “had brought the ranch back from the brink once and he was unwilling to do it again” (36). Her father had worked for decades to keep the ranch viable, but when its financial stability dissolved and his personal life changed, he chose to let the ranch go; after selling, he moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and retired.

While Jordan’s father ceded to changing times, Mary Clearman Blew’s father, facing similar economic hardship, could not “accept a world where the old customs of ranching and his homestead boyhood had been replaced by the bottom lines of agribusiness” (*Circle ix*). And while Blunt and Jordan, as females, would not inherit their families’ ranches, Blew’s father “raised her and her younger sister as sons [...] legitimate heirs to a western legacy [...] In his mind, Mary and her sister will inherit the ranch, will keep going a family tradition of cowboying that is dying out. He despairs to see it go” (Comer 228). Throughout adolescence, however, Blew grew increasingly skeptical of and disillusioned with the western mythology and cowboy culture her father expected her to

embrace. She recognized the encroaching “economic and cultural changes that will render the cowboy increasingly irrelevant to modern ranch life” (Comer 228) and acknowledged the fact that the family ranch was failing, while her father grew “less and less able to face the reality of the downward spiral” (Blew, *Waltz* 175).

After graduating from high school, Blew enrolled at the University of Montana with her father’s blessing. He expected Blew and her sister to earn teaching certificates, just as his wife and mother had, and teach in country schools near the family ranch during the winters and work with him on the ranch during the summers. But for Blew, college became “something I never expected and cannot explain: not something to grab and have done with but a door opening, a glimpse of an endless passage” (*Waltz* 165). Determined to pursue that passage, Blew bucked her father’s power as paterfamilias and refused her inheritance of a dying ranching tradition. She incurred her father’s wrath for choosing self identity over fruitless servitude, for choosing a life of the mind over a life tied to the land. Blew’s father viewed her defection as an act of betrayal: “For years after I left Montana he would not even speak to me [...] What I felt for him was anger that he had tried too hard to keep me tied to a tradition I saw as illusory. He had given everything he had for me; all I wanted was to be free of the cowboy” (*Waltz* 54).

While Blew, Blunt and Jordan “left behind permanently the [...] ranching culture as a defining daily lifestyle” (Comer 224), in the ensuing years they did not venture far from their native ground. They attended universities in the northern Rocky Mountain region and now earn their livelihoods in urban areas of Idaho, Montana and Utah. And

they became writers whose works evidence that while they broke free of the cowboy in body, their childhood landscapes refused to release them in spirit.

*After all, to write about humans is to naturally write about the things that matter in their world: weather, wind, plants, trees, animals and water.*

~David Gessner

#### IV. Why Women Write about the Land

Blew, Blunt and Jordan left their native ground when they were young women in their early 20s or 30s; they went on to earn advanced degrees and establish successful careers in academia and the arts. Decades after they had departed their childhood landscapes, the magnet-pull of place prompted them to write their stories. Blew's *All but the Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family* was published in 1991, when she was in her early 50s; Jordan was in her late 30s when her memoir *Riding the White Horse Home: A Western Family Album* was published, in 1994; Blunt worked on her memoir for nearly ten years and was in her late 40s when *Breaking Clean* came out, in 2002. What factors spurred these women and others with similar western backgrounds to delve into their pasts, to explore powerful and often painful experiences, and shape memory into meaning through the craft of writing? Why were these women compelled to write about how their "childhoods and comings of age in different pockets of the Rocky Mountain West shaped, scarred and strengthened" their lives (Barnes and Blew, *Circle ix*)?

As isolated as their families' ranches were, a love of language and reading was instilled in these young girls who would later become writers. They developed an ear for

the “roll and rhyme of language” (Blunt 111) from their parents, from the occasional outside visitor, and from the ranch hands who wielded colorful, slang-filled vocabularies. Blunt was thrilled by her no-nonsense mother’s cleverness with words that she exhibited in rare moments of play with the barnyard cats, which evoked from her “a lovely gift of language and gentle wit” (111). Even though the availability of books was sparse, Blew, Blunt and Jordan developed a love of reading, thanks in part to their mothers’ determined efforts to trek to the county library miles away, and by poring over any text they could get their hands on. Blew “learned to read at home and, my nose an inch from the page, read everything in sight. Even the strange old textbooks with nineteenth-century illustrations [...] Even the Hereford breeders’ catalogs” (*Waltz* 52). Jordan also credits her pursuit of writing to her great-aunt and great-grandmother, from whom she absorbed a keen awareness of the physical world because they were “women who had learned to see. Marie could read the landscape even through her shattered sky-blue eyes and Nana could pluck fossils and arrowheads off barren ground [...] These women make me train my own eye. These women make me write” (17-18).

The women in these girls’ lives – their mothers, grandmothers and aunts – also helped chart their paths to becoming writers by modeling the value and importance of higher education. To ensure self-sufficiency and protect their independence, Blunt’s mother earned a two-year degree from a community college and Jordan’s mother earned a bachelor’s degree and later a teaching degree (her father graduated from college as well). Blew’s mother attended a normal school (a school that trains high-school graduates to be teachers) for five quarters, which in the 1930s was enough to earn elementary-school certification, and her maternal grandmother attended a normal school in Iowa,

then renewed her certificate through correspondence when she began teaching in Montana. Blew's paternal grandmother held a lifetime teaching certificate in Pennsylvania. "She used to tell me about working her way through school scrubbing floors, with her spelling book propped against her pail," Blew recalls (Interview). These women's education options were slim due to gendered cultural restraints and the remote areas in which they lived, yet they persisted in spite of the obstacles to reach for and grab "a teaching certificate as if it were a gold ring" (*Waltz* 165).

A key theme that surfaces often in the memoirs by Blew, Blunt and Jordan is the powerful story-telling tradition that coursed through their families and communities. Blunt's family "talked in facts [...] but stories were how we spoke. A good story rose to the surface of conversation like heavy cream, a thing to be savored and served artfully" (137). Being able to tell a good story led to acceptance by the community and a secure place in the family's collective memory. As a child, Blunt first forayed into her region's story-telling tradition by writing simple poems and humorous news stories. I, too, was drawn to language early. I read everything I could, from the signed ditties in my parents' high-school yearbooks to my father's history of the West book collection. I wrote poems and produced a neighborhood newsletter for a time. However, like Blunt, and like many other girls raised in the West, I remained through childhood a "story-teller's apprentice" (137) who listened to the stories my father told at the dinner table and family gatherings but didn't speak my own. Perhaps girls raised in the West grow to become women writers because, as children and as females, there wasn't a place for us at the storytelling table. So we watched and listened and absorbed all that was said – and what remained unsaid – around us. Blunt says "growing up in a community of storytellers" (McFarland 4) was the

underlying influence that led her to write *Breaking Clean*. She developed an ear for narrative as a child because she had learned to listen and to distill meaning from sound and silence: “Listening to stories, I learned what was worth saying and what need not be spoken aloud; I learned how we remember and whom we remembered and why; how facts are shaped or colored or forgotten” (136). As children, we became expert at paying attention with both our eyes and ears; our sensory memories took root and held fast, and lay dormant for years, waiting to be voiced.

As I picked up on the recurring theme of the central role of storytelling in western women memoirists’ childhoods, I gained a new insight into my own childhood that mirrored the authors’: men were almost always the storytellers in our families and communities. Jordan noted that the few times women told stories, they “generally revolved around events in the outside world. The more interior stories of family, of grief, of loneliness, of emotional trial, survival, and even triumph were not spoken of at all or told only in truncated form” (386). My father held court as the storyteller in my family; he and the men at social gatherings dominated conversations with their hunting and adventure stories. My mother told stories of her courtship and wedding when I pestered her for details, but she didn’t tell stories about the years before she met my father. I knew who she was as part of a couple, but I didn’t know who she was – what she thought, felt and wanted – as an individual. Like the women in Jordan’s life, my mother did not speak of interior grief and loneliness, or emotional trial, survival and triumph.

Jordan says it is the women’s hidden stories that prompted her to write; she wanted to find out how these women made it through and what it cost them (Barnes and Blew, *Circle* 386). When Blew began writing to retrieve her past, she was drawn to retell

events that had been handed down as family legend. Like Jordan, the events that were most enticing to Blew were those that had been “preserved in the ‘secret stories,’ elliptical and pointless and mystifying, that my grandmother and my great-aunts told around their Sunday tables after the dishes had been washed, in hushed voices that dropped or stopped altogether at the approach of one of the men or an unwise question from an eavesdropping child” (*Bone Deep* 5).

First, second and third generations ranch wives told stories that were veiled or disappeared underground altogether largely because, according to Ron McFarland, the culture of western “patriarchy traditionally commanded silence” (102). Fourth generation ranching women such as Blunt and Blew bucked this tradition of silence when they broke from their families and the land, and began to write and publish their nonfiction works. They joined a small but growing contingent of western women who were speaking out and voicing the emotional truth of their experiences. Blunt says that when she left the ranch and enrolled in college, through a slow transformation spanning eight years, she “gradually...found my voice again as my children slept. I began to write” (267). Blew, who first tried her hand at fiction, found her voice when she heeded an inner call to return to her childhood landscape: “Far from home and teaching again after years in higher ed administration, I felt a hollowness that writing fiction seemed to do nothing to fill. And so I started all over again, writing essays to retrieve the past” (*Bone Deep* 4).

A primary issue Blunt explores in her memoir that is common among western women’s narratives is the conflict between her “sense of familial, communal and social responsibility and [her] desire for independent, individual, and personal identity” (McFarland 101). The pursuit of an authentic identity is a key impetus that leads western

women to write. Writing offers a medium through which they can excavate answers to the chief questions a memoirist asks herself: “Who am I and why?” (Barnes, *Landscapes* 17). Barnes – and her regional contemporaries – answers these critical questions by looking to and writing about the landscape that holds her stories. In Jordan’s quest for self-identity, she wrote about her Wyoming landscape as a way to “understand the forces that shaped me, which are in large part the forces that shaped the rural West” (16). For these and other women raised in the West, crafting an authentic, cohesive identity requires examining critically, from an adult’s distanced perspective, the narratives they inherited as children. These women write to explore their long-held doubts about the “myth of the West” (Barnes and Blew, *Circle x*) and to test the veracity of their childhood beliefs and worldviews. They write as Blew writes, to reconcile “the conflicting claims of the exact truth of the story and its emotional truth as I perceived it” (*Bone Deep* 7). They write as Jordan writes, to unearth “the unconformities that connect my heritage with who I am now” (15). They write to interrogate their pasts, asking tough questions and positing answers so that they might answer the most critical question of all: “What kinds of stories shall we tell to replace the parts of those stories we no longer hold true” (Comer 224-225)?

Writing to discover the “why” of our lives is a personal endeavor. When we share our stories with others through writing groups or classes, and through publication or public readings, our stories – our privately unearthed truths – become part of a collective; they are no longer our own. According to Blew, “What I remember is far less trustworthy than the story I tell about it. The possibility for connection lies in story” (*Waltz* 10).

Writing our stories allows us to articulate our emotional and intellectual connection with

our external world; sharing our stories with others creates connections between people, as we discover that we weren't isolated in our experiences after all. Blunt labored alone at her typewriter to write her story of physical and gender isolation on a Montana ranch. When she shared her stories for the first time in her writing classes at the University of Missoula, she was surprised to see her classmates nodding with empathy and understanding:

I came to recognize the landscape of my life in the lives of many women [...] Few shared my place of origin or the events of my life, but many, it seems, shared my experience. Listening to their stories, I came to understand how women can be isolated by circumstances as well as by distance, and how our experiences, though geographically distinct, often translated into the same feelings. (302)

Discovering that others shared her experiences and feelings emboldened Blunt to believe in and continue voicing her own truth, and convicted her of the necessity of communicating that truth after remaining silent for decades as the daughter and wife of ranchers: "Away from the physical presence of my past, I found it easy to argue that what mattered most was the story, the truth of what we tell ourselves, the versions we pass along to our daughters" (303). Writing her story instilled in Blunt a sense of urgency to communicate her truth to those who may never otherwise hear it and who could most benefit from it: other females living entrapped in a culture of silence.

By writing their stories, women raised in the West offer new possibilities and alternate paths for other females in similar circumstances; their writing also achieves broader significance and impact. Barnes and Blew, in their introduction to *Circle of*

*Women*, state that because their mothers' and grandmothers' stories remained secret, their task "as writers, as daughters, as mothers ourselves, became a search for a more complete tradition than the one that had been handed down to us through family history, popular culture, or even the literature written in our region" (x). Their search yielded narratives that revised their own family histories, inserted new voices into the West's masculine storytelling tradition, and hammered new cracks into long-held western stereotypes.

Writing memoir is an act of telling personal stories in an intimate voice; the best and most effective memoirists write with the supposition that the personal can call attention to and inform experiences and issues that are universally significant. Unlike autobiography's linear, chronological recounting of events, "Memoir mines the past, examining it for shape and meaning, in the belief that from that act can emerge a larger, communal meaning. Memoir can heal, it can warn, and it can provide spiritual direction" (Miller 133). In telling their personal stories, women who chronicle their experiences growing up in the West also chronicle the history of the West and its settlement, and speak to broader human experiences, such as women coping with isolation and harsh environments, and the binding ties of family that are tested and sometimes snap when communication and understanding break down or are absent altogether. Blew's memoirs *All but the Waltz* and *Balsamroot* move from the personal to the universal as they record the "growing distances between the generations, the sacrifices made to ensure physical or emotional survival, and the rejections that ensue when an individual breaks from the traditional expectations" (Karrell 140).

The most prominent issue of universal significance that courses through the narratives written by western women is the marked transformation of their home land and

its people that began gathering force in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Staying Put*, Sanders writes that in his home region in the Midwest, “mistakes are being made seven days a week – with machinery, chemicals, guns, plows, fountain pens, bare hands. I suspect the same is true in every region. But who is keeping track? Who speaks for the wordless creatures? Who supplies memory and consciousness for the land?” (112). Writers such as Blew, Barnes and Jordan supply memory and consciousness for their native ground when they write about their families and neighbors facing the destruction of natural resources, the commercial development of land, economic downturns and corporate takeovers, and the slow deaths of once-thriving ranching communities and rural ways of life.

In *Breaking Clean*'s afterword, “Leaving Home,” Blunt details a shift in the tone and topic of private conversations taking place at her family's dinner table that point to the transformation occurring within her community:

In the daily talk of work and range planning, my parents did not speak differently of the deeded land they owned outright and the public lands they leased. But by the seventies, stories began to surface of hunters and streamside anglers who stood their ground and argued their right to access [...] As the pressure grew, families who had tended those acres since the turn of the century and before began to bristle at the invasion. (293)

Blew sheds a broader light on central Montana's collective struggles when she seeks to understand the source of (and find empathy for) her mother's barely suppressed anger. Alongside the grind of daily chores, ongoing isolation, homeschooling her children, and caring for a husband in ill health, external forces threatened: “The reality of [my

mother's] closed life along the river bottom became more and more attenuated by the outward reality of banks and interest rates and the shifting course of agribusiness. She was touchy with money worries [...] Perhaps these were reasons enough for rage" (*Waltz* 167). Jordan traces the steady decline of Wyoming's Iron Mountain ranching community when she considers the transformations that occurred across three generations of her family: "The couple of hundred square miles that comprise the neighborhood supported two or three hundred people in my grandfather's day, perhaps a hundred and fifty when my father was a child, sixty or seventy when I lived there. Today [...] fewer than thirty people, counting children, live in all those miles and miles" (15).

Jordan concludes her memoir with a declaration of intent: in all likelihood, she'll never live in Iron Mountain again, but it will always be her home and a place she "will fight for, not only in that corner of Wyoming where it actually exists but in the hundreds of other places like it throughout the rural West" (206). Jordan's closing words reveal her desire to defend and protect the land she has lost but dearly loves. Communicating this message of activism – whether overt or implied – is another important reason why women raised in the West write about the land. Sanders is unabashed in his writing about the widespread destruction of land and the urgent need for western culture to revamp its assumptions of citizenship; his message is lined with a gentle yet persistent call to action. Artists, he asserts, can take up that call through the mediums in which they work:

We're likely to flood, pave, poison or otherwise abuse the land if we think of it merely as property or as raw material for human designs. To think of land more intimately, more reverently, we need the help of art. Relatively few locations in America have been cherished by writers, photographers, filmmakers or painters

[...] To spare ourselves and our neighbors from further uprooting, we must defend the places we love, and we can begin that defense by filling our places with imagination. (*Landscapes* 204)

When I first encountered this passage I realized that in writing about my native ground, I am taking up Sanders' call to action by drawing attention to a particular place, my place – northwest Montana – whose natural resources are disappearing due to logging and mining, and whose people now live amid a Superfund site and are dying of asbestos poisoning. I am not a vocal environmentalist or activist, but I love the land on which I was raised that is now disappearing. I'm not one to write a book on the W.R. Grace vermiculite-mine scandal, but I can write about having my lungs tested and x-rayed in an EPA trailer in Libby, Mont., and about my 69-year-old father who, in Jan. 2009, was diagnosed with asbestosis scarring in his left lung. He contracted it from vermiculite-dusted trees he bought from W.R. Grace's property in 1977 and used to build our house. My family peeled bark from the logs and then tromped on it for several years as it lay scattered on the ground at the building site. As Sanders, Blew, Blunt and Jordan have done in their works, I can write from personal experience as a portal to collective experience, not to idealize my childhood landscape, but, as Sanders advocates, to supply memory and conscious for the land.

Writing about the West's collision with harsh, present-day economic and environmental realities is an act of defense, a way to challenge conventional thinking of land as property to be used for human purposes; for western women who left their native ground by choice or by force, writing is also an act of mourning and of honoring one's "lifelong, bone-deep attachment to place" (Sanders, *Landscapes* 212). Jordan is explicit

in her aim to record and mourn the loss of her family's fourth-generation ranch. Early on in her memoir, she reveals that her book is about "a place and the people attached to it, about a way of life that has almost disappeared [...] Because this is a book about loss, it is much involved with the process of grieving, but it has allowed me to know where I came from. In that knowing, I have a way to keep my people with me and also let them go. I have a way to hold to the land" (16). Writing about the Wyoming ranchland her family loved and lived on for almost ninety years allows Jordan to "acknowledge the pain in yearning for one's native ground, the deep anguish in not being able, ever, to return" (Sanders, *Landscapes* 212).

Women who grew up on ranches write in part to mourn the loss of their native ground; in doing so, they honor the loss of centuries-old knowledge and skills required to live off the land. As ranching populations dwindle and once-thriving ranches meld into conglomerations or become the property of oil companies, communal wisdom and traditions can be destroyed. According to poet and cultural critic Lewis Hyde, "We tend to think of genocide as the physical destruction of a race or group, but the term may be aptly expanded to include the obliteration of the *genius* of a group, the killing of its creative spirit" (qtd. in Jordan 16). What strains of genius die when a ranching community goes under? How many girls today can, as Blew did as a child, "ride the broncs we had roped and hobbled and sacked out in the old cowboy way" (*Waltz* 48)? What woman today can, as Blunt did when she was a young rancher's wife, struggle through the night with a heifer in labor and deliver a calf using calving chains and a calf puller? Jordan writes of her community's loss of "the particular genius required by a life

tied to land and animals and seasons: The design of each building, each corral, each ditch was tied directly to the creative act of staying alive” (16).

As I write my family’s story, I think of my father, whose imprint covers nearly every square inch of the log house we built: its custom front door and kitchen pantry, the double-barrel wood stove and slate hearth, the front deck with its wrought-iron planters and back porch with its embedded cattle guard awaiting the scrape of muddy boots. He fashioned by hand almost every necessity we required and every comfort we wanted. The house stands empty now, its untended wood warping and rotting and speckled with mold. I write about my native ground in part to mark and grieve the loss of the craftsmanship and creative spirit my father and other western men of his aging generation poured into their daily efforts to shelter and provide for their families.

Finally, some women who have left landscapes they love write as an initial step toward making peace with their lost pasts, processing the emotional upheaval of leaving, and putting down roots in new ground. Barnes’ identity and attachment to place fell in landscape limbo when she moved from her beloved Clearwater River, which was central to her life and her writing, to a mountainous area with no water. She wrote the essay “Almost Paradise” when she was with grappling with the pain of separating from the river and struggling to connect with new, foreign terrain. In the course of writing the essay, Barnes discovers that her “grief for the past often causes me to separate myself from the present. I mourn that ‘other country’ I am no longer a resident of. The future is a narrative that does not yet belong to me, and so I fill that void with what I have known, cannot let go of, and fear I may never regain” (*Landscapes* 29). The act of writing allows Barnes to locate the source of her sorrow, and to arrive at an understanding that leads her

to sit still in her new landscape and wait for new stories to unfold that will reestablish her sense of self and belonging.

## V. Closing Analysis: Women's Contributions to a New Phase of Rocky Mountain Regionalist Writing

The memoirs by western women writers published in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were pioneering in that they broke from the tradition of the patriarchal western narrative and voiced women's stories and experiences that had been suppressed. According to William Bevis, "we now have accounts by women who were born to old ranches – notably Blew, Jordan and Blunt – and who had absorbed feminist issues before they wrote. We have entered a new phase of women's writing, well beyond pioneering memories: books by fourth-generation ranch women and second-generation feminists" (210). This new phase of western women's writing is embedded within a broader phase that Comer defines as the Rocky Mountain school of new regionalist writing, which began in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural waters "linked to the changing social tides created by the civil rights movements and contemporary feminism" (Comer 224). Memoirs by second-generation feminist writers such as Blew, Blunt and Jordan have fueled a revisionist western narrative that reflects the West's shift from "the self-reliant individual battling against nature, to issues of family, society, community" (Bevis 211). In their works, regionalist female writers explore communal themes such as women's "endless, lonely work for others...children, relationship, nurturing, abuse, and family disaster" (Bevis 211). In doing so, they move beyond simply reinventing a "classic, but now feminized, 'American moment' upon [...] western lands" (Comer 224); writers such as Blew, Blunt and Jordan have introduced new stories that forward an "alternate narrative of the nation, an alternative form of

western knowledge” (230), and that dismantle stereotypical images of the western woman.

Even as the women’s groundbreaking memoirs ushered in a new phase of female regionalist writing that promotes a “radically new way of perceiving the western experience [that] draws on the self-reliance and courage of the old western mythology but sees greater strength in community, in making connections, in interdependence” (Barnes and Blew, *Circle* xi), Bevis asserts that they concurrently brought to a close a separate phase of western writing. According to Bevis, the first phase of western writing documented the exploration and settlement of the frontier West. The memoirs by Blew, Blunt and Jordan serve as the definitive works of the second phase, and signal its close, because they chronicle “bygone days [that] tell of a mythic agricultural past” (222).

While the three memoirs may be old-fashioned in content, they also serve as a transition into what Bevis defines as the third phase of western writing, in that Blew, Blunt and Jordan question and reject the validity of the mythic West’s narratives, chronicle the changing landscape of agricultural industry, and explore surfacing tensions that signal the beginnings of the West’s shift to a modern future. As a trio, the memoirs offer a tandem documentary of evolving 20<sup>th</sup>-century ranching methods and increasingly modern ways of life. Blew, who was born at the tail end of the Great Depression, opens *All but the Waltz* with images of a flickering kerosene lamp lighting her family’s kitchen, and of sharing a chamber pot and a bed with her grandmother. Blunt, who was born in the mid-1950s, represents the “last generation of rural Americans to spend several of her childhood years without the benefits of electricity, indoor plumbing, or running water” (McFarland 223); and Jordan, born in the late 1950s, writes of coming of age in the 1960s

and 70s on a ranch humming with the conveniences of the day. The three narratives conclude during the final two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as new technologies were linking the remote western plains with the outside world via VCRs, satellite dishes and computers. Bevis identifies this technology-fueled modern West as the primary impetus for the advent of the third phase of western writing that, he says, must contain stories that reflect the West's emerging mythologies and 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities, stories about the stockbroker's trophy cabin, the shift from farming to a service economy, and organic ranchers opposing genetically altered seed banks (223).

Since publishing their memoirs, Blew, Blunt and Jordan have produced works that speak to Bevis' third stage of Rocky Mountain regionalist writing and heed his charge that contemporary western writing must reflect the West's emerging mythologies and 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities. Blunt has published essays in collections and magazines that explore her journey to adapt from her role as a ranch wife to the roles she takes on today, as a woman, mother and teacher living in the urban West. She points to her essay "Airborne," which explores being a single parent to children who had been raised on a ranch and then were removed from their 'place' in that world. Blunt says she has "discovered that boys, especially, can find all sorts of ways to re-invent the cowboy mythology in urban settings" (Interview). Another essay, "Where There's Smoke" was published in Kim Barnes' and Claire Davis' collection, *Kiss Tomorrow Hello*. This essay is set in Missoula during the summer of 2000, when Blunt's three children had left home and begun their own lives, and she underwent a hysterectomy; both were life-altering events that forced her to reconsider and redefine her role of being a mother and her identity as a woman.

Jordan has transitioned from Bevis' second phase to the third through writing the introduction to the 2007 collection *Home Land: Ranching and a West That Works*, a book that Jordan says "considers new paradigms of land management and consensus" (Interview). The collection features essays by poets, ranchers and conservationists who explore the West's shifting landscape and the steps small ranches must take to survive in the shadow of vast ranching corporations. Jordan's 2002 *Field Notes from Yosemite: Apprentice to Place, An Illustrated Journal* features her essays and watercolor paintings that speak to how we can use and enjoy but not harm or deplete America's treasured wild places. Jordan also co-edited the 1995 collection *The Stories that Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write about the West*, which presents essays by women who express and explore their uncertainty about the myths of the new West and about the primacy placed on rugged individualism over communal connection.

Three years after *All but the Waltz* was published, Blew charged into the third phase of western writing with *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*, which she co-edited with Kim Barnes. The book features a selection of short stories, poems, essays, and novel excerpts in which present-day women carry on Teresa Jordan's impetus to tell women's "hidden stories" of isolation, loneliness and hardship related to living in the Rocky Mountain region and to explore both old and emerging western myths. In addition to *Circle of Women*, Blew has published a number of more recent works that chronicle, analyze and critique the modern West. In her 1999 collection *Bone Deep in Landscape*, Blew writes about her connection to and loss of landscapes in Montana and Idaho. Her 2000 short-story collection *Sister Coyote:*

*Montana Stories* features stories set in the 1960s through the 1990s that tell of women coming of age on the modern western frontier.

Blew's 2008 novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, is her most powerful and recent work that exemplifies Bevis' third stage of western writing. The novel features a female protagonist named Corey, who is in her early sixties and lives alone on the ranch where she was raised by her father. Corey and the book's cast of characters struggle to navigate the clash between their old West traditions and the encroachment of the new West. The book's multiple storylines include long-time ranching families and widows coping with the loss of their ranches, a rancher whose grandchildren have no interest in carrying on the family's ranching tradition, the suicide of Corey's rodeo-hero father whose worldview remained entrenched in the myths of the old West, the emergence of Corey's own long-held and long-suppressed desire to become an artist, the effects of the arrival of technology, an influx of wealthy, out-of-state people who are purchasing property and building expansive vacation homes, and a transplanted family from California in which the father transforms their new property into a gated, survivalist compound and constructs a meth lab. Through her fictional characters in *Jackalope Dreams*, Blew renders a timely and accurate narrative of the West's erupting tensions and new, 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities.

In addition to Blew, Blunt and Jordan, other regionalist women who are writing in the third stage include film producer, nature writer and Montana resident Annick Smith. Smith, who is seventy-two years old, published an essay collection in 2004, *In This We Are Native: On Going Away and Coming Home*, in which she explores loggers' and developers' destruction of the forest surrounding her home and the possibilities for

rebirth of the land and its animal inhabitants. In 2008, journalist and author Annie Proulx, age seventy-three, published *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3*, her third collection of stories set amid Wyoming's harsh and sweeping terrain. The stories depict both the old West – pioneer homesteaders battling banks and the elements – and its slide into modern day. One of Proulx's stories is set at a home for aging cowboys and ranch widows, while in other stories, 21<sup>st</sup>-century hippies search for new identities in the shrinking wilderness and real-estate developers snap up land for profit. In the collection's final story, "Tits-Up in a Ditch," about a grieving Iraq War veteran who returns to her family on the Wyoming plains, Proulx delves into new political and global realities affecting the West that regionalist writers are beginning to voice.

Women in the Rocky Mountain region such as Blew, Jordan, Smith and Proulx – successful, long-time writers now in their 50s, 60s, and 70s – have contributed prominently to the canon of regionalist literature about the West's mythic past and modern present. Are there emerging women regionalist writers who will carry on their legacy, women in their 20s, 30s and 40s who are writing about the present-day West and who will shepherd the female regionalist-writing tradition well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? My research yielded evidence confirming the existence of a strong pool of younger voices that are telling stories of the new West. Fiction writer Maile Meloy, a native of Helena, Montana, who is thirty-seven years old, was named one of Granta's 21 Best Young American Novelists, in 2007; many of the stories in her collection *Half in Love* are set in present-day Montana. Meloy's work is also included in the 2003 anthology *The New Montana Story*, edited by Rick Newby, which features Montana-based short stories, novel excerpts, memoir and personal essays by established or emerging young male and

female writers who live throughout the state. More than 150 western women's voices contributed to the 2004 collection *Crazy Woman Creek: Women Rewrite the American West*, the third book in a series featuring nonfiction stories and poems by and about western women. The series is edited by three women, Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier and Nancy Curtis, who help manage ranches and write professionally, and whose goal for the books is to shed the mythic image of the western cowgirl. While the women whose works are featured in the latest collection are not professional writers, their snapshot narratives contribute to the new forms of western knowledge introduced in the memoirs of Blew, Blunt and Jordan, in that their stories and poems focus on community and interpersonal connection that further unveil the new West.

In my research of younger Rocky Mountain regionalist women writers, I was particularly interested to learn if there are women who are following the path forged by Blew, Blunt and Jordan by writing memoirs about landscape and self-identity, and that chronicle and explore environmental, economic and cultural changes occurring in specific regions of the modern West. Barnes, who is forty-eight, says her personal essays such as "The Clearwater" and "Almost Paradise" contemplate identity in the contemporary, "postlapsarian" West (Interview). Jordan cites author Karol Griffin, a native of Laramie, Wyo., who, in 2003 at the age of forty, published her memoir *Skin Deep: Tattoos, the Disappearing West, Very Bad Men, and My Deep Love for Them All*. In her memoir, Griffin tells of her personal – and harrowing – search for self identity, explores Wyoming's subculture of tattooing, and offers commentary on changes occurring in her home state. Jordan also points to Laura Pritchett, thirty-seven, a Colorado native and novelist who is writing a memoir about her schizophrenic brother

and her parents, who had wanted to sell their ranch in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and retire, but decided to keep the ranch when it proved to be the one thing that helped their son. Like the works of Scott Russell Sanders, Pritchett's fiction and nonfiction writing calls critical attention to development and land-use issues. Her concern for the loss of Colorado's wild places spurred her to undertake the book projects *The Pulse of the River*, *Colorado Writers Speak for the Endangered Cache la Poudre* and *Home Land: Writings for a West that Works*.

In her role as a faculty member of the MFA program at the University of Idaho, Barnes can confirm that “there are any number of women writing in what Bevis calls ‘the third stage,’ but they are young and many are working their way through various MFA programs” (Interview). She identifies upcoming but not-yet-published regionalist women writers Anna Vodicka, who is writing about her identity as the granddaughter of the Italian immigrant who made Idaho potatoes famous, and Brittney Carman, who is writing about her identity as a western woman inside the Mormon faith (in the tradition of Terry Tempest Williams). Young women are writing creative nonfiction and memoir in MFA programs throughout the northern Rocky Mountain region, at schools including Utah State University, the University of Montana, and Colorado State University. Those whose works will be published will join ranks with a new wave of women writers giving voice to the rising mythologies of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century West.

My goal as a creative-nonfiction writer is to contribute to the growing body of works by Rocky Mountain regionalist women who are writing landscape-based memoir, and whose works inform and reflect Bevis' third stage of western writing. My story should make a unique contribution to the canon of contemporary western writing. In my

research, I have not encountered women of any generation who have written or are currently writing memoir set in the landscape of northwest Montana. Further, unlike Blew, Blunt and Jordan, who were raised in fourth-generation ranching families, my parents were first-generation Montana residents who fit a unique category of the western region's sparse population, according to Dayton Duncan, author of *Miles from Nowhere*, which documents his 1990 road-trip exploration of fifteen states comprising the contemporary western frontier. In his travels, Duncan found few first-generation residents like my parents: young, educated adults who gave up well-paying jobs and an urban lifestyle to eke out a living and raise a family in a remote area of the West (131). My parents were an uncommon breed of Montana transplant: they weren't teachers or government employees; they weren't seasonal workers, back-to-the-land hippies, disillusioned expatriates or draft dodgers; they weren't growing dope, running from the law, or hiding in the FBI's Witness Protection Program (people in all of these categories were our fellow residents in Lincoln County). My parents valued place over financial security; rather than living where they could pursue professional careers, they chose to work a broad spectrum of jobs (sometimes two or three concurrently, some of which were menial) that allowed them to put down roots where they wanted to live.

My memoir will contribute to Bevis' third stage of western writing because my family both lived through and witnessed the evolution of the modern West, its emerging mythologies and 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities. We moved to northwest Montana in the late 1970s, when burgeoning national and international awareness of environmental issues led to the advent of the environmental movement. My parents bought twenty-one undeveloped acres of forest fronting a blue-ribbon trout-fishing river. The land and river

and the region in which we lived appeared to be pristine, but signs soon began surfacing that northwest Montana was not immune to serious environmental problems. While my mother worked as a secretary for the ASARCO silver mine, its tailings ponds were leaching into the river that ran through our property; the water turned a murky yellow, talk rippled among our neighbors that the mine was poisoning the water and management knew it, and the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife documented decreasing numbers of fish species.

During the 1980s, zigzag dirt roads and huge swaths of bald earth began to appear on mountainsides as unchecked logging practices led to the construction of 8,300 miles of logging roads and more than 750,000 deforested acres in the 2.2 million-acre Kootenai National Forest in which we lived (Koehler NewWest.net). During the summers when I was in college, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service conducting riparian mapping of government-owned land that had been logged. The maps I produced were presented as evidence in court cases in the 1990s, when local and state environmental groups began suing the Forest Service for supporting unsustainable and destructive logging practices. Also in the 1980s, the Environmental Protection Agency began conducting studies of asbestos produced by the W.R. Grace vermiculite mine in Libby, Montana, and reports of asbestos-related illnesses and lawsuits started surfacing. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the local environmental crisis broke as a national story, W.R. Grace declared bankruptcy, the EPA declared Libby a Superfund cleanup site.

In addition to the environmental problems that surfaced in northwest Montana in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of land also began to encroach. When my parents were seeking property to buy in 1977, land was affordable and available; my parents'

chief requirement was that the land they bought had to be close enough to town for my brother and me to attend school, but remote enough that the area wouldn't be developed over the next thirty years. Since 2000, government-owned and protected land has been sold off to developers, the price of private property has skyrocketed, and contractors are building elaborate vacation homes for wealthy out-of-state residents. During recent visits to Montana, my parents have taken me on driving tours of housing developments that have cropped up along the once untouched shores of Bull Lake and other lake-front acreage.

On a personal level, the log home my family built and lived in for more than twenty years is now the trophy cabin Bevis refers to as being a new element of the third phase of western writing. After my brother and I left home, my parents decided the house and property were too large for them to inhabit and manage. They sold the house two attorneys from California who use it as their third vacation home; the new owners hired a caretaker to look after the house and property and spend one or two weeks a year there during the summer. In a further nod to my family's story contributing to Bevis' third stage of western writing, the property along the driveway has eroded into the river, rendering the driveway impassible and threatening a nearby county road, power lines, and a home downriver. The owners of the log house refuse to pay for repairs and have sued Fish & Wildlife to foot the reconstruction bill, which has now surpassed \$100,000.

Bevis asserts that the arrival of technology and its affect on remote regions of the West is a key factor that has given rise to the third phase of western writing. When my parents bought the property, they made a conscious decision to live without many amenities. We gathered our own firewood and heated the house by woodstove for

fourteen years. We hauled water from the river for two years until my parents had a well put in. They had a phone line installed as soon as we moved into the basement in case of emergencies; we shared a party line with two neighbors and gave our number to an operator when we called long distance. We lived without a television for several years, until the winter isolation drove my parents to buy a TV. There were many snowy nights when my father dragged an extension ladder outside and climbed up on the roof to adjust the sprawling antenna, one of us standing just inside the deck door, ready to holler out “Alright – it’s good!” when a decent picture appeared. We also had a radio that picked up the AM station out of Libby; when my brother and I were in high school, we could pull in a static-filled FM rock station out of Spokane if we wrapped tinfoil on the radio antenna and angled it just right.

Modern-day technology has arrived in our pocket of the West in recent years, in the form of computers and the eventual availability of Internet access. It seems the last bastion of old-fashioned living died recently, when cell-phone service reached Lincoln County in Dec. 2008. My parents have a computer and use the Internet (my mother is more adept than my father), and they carry a cell phone. But my father commented recently that if he had never married and was a bachelor, he’d be living in a cabin up in the hills with no neighbors and no lawn to maintain. And my mother, who has been reading Kathleen Norris’ nonfiction book *Dakota*, in which Norris writes of South Dakota’s remoteness, silence and wide-open spaces, wrote in a Jan. 2009 e-mail to me that she wished she could move to the plains of South Dakota and live without the Internet and cell phones. My parents have adapted to the changing technological times in Montana and are concerned but realistic regarding the seemingly unstoppable forces of

land development and the depletion of natural resources. My best guess is that in their hearts, my father longs to go back to 1977, when he was young and strong and just setting out to fulfill his dream of crafting a life in the woods, and my mother longs for the peace and quiet way of life she enjoyed during the years we lived in the log house.

Like Blew, Blunt and Jordan, I left my childhood home to attend college. My hope and plan was to return to Lincoln County to live for good, eventually living in the log house my parents would pass on to my brother and me. But then in college and afterward came opportunities to travel, interesting jobs in the U.S. and overseas, marriage, a growing desire for financial security and job stability, a growing desire to live in an area that offered access to cultural events, the arts, and higher education, and a growing understanding that I would not have easy access to such opportunities if I lived in Troy. I continued to make choices that drew me further away from my initial dream to live in Montana, all the while thinking that my family's home and property would always be there for me to return to, and my husband and I would retire there one day. Then, when I was in my late twenties, my parents sold the house and land, and had a new frame house built a few miles away on a half-acre lot in a small neighborhood rimming a lake. Like Jordan, I no longer had my childhood home to return to. When I go back to Montana now, it is as an outsider, a visitor, a tourist. I can no longer step out my parents' front door and spend hours content and alone exploring my known and beloved childhood woods; now, I am a trespasser on the land. As more areas are developed that had once been open to the public, the opportunities to explore and find solitude are fewer. When we want to enjoy the Montana landscape, my aging parents and I usually seek out the

same two or three locations that we know are still open to the public and that aren't too difficult for them to traverse.

Scott Russell Sanders writes that as he was working on his essay "After the Flood," he was aware that "grief over the loss of place could be dismissed as nostalgia. So I pointed out [in the essay] that the root meaning of *nostalgia* is 'return pain,' and I argued that such pain arises not from superficial longing for one's youth but from 'bone-deep attachment to place'" (*Landscapes* 200). When I visit my parents in Montana, my father will usually ask if I want to take a ride to the property with him, squeeze past the locked gate, and walk to the top of the driveway to see how much more land has collapsed, how much nearer the river cuts to the log house. Each time he asks, I tell him no. But at some point during the weekend I will slip off and return to the property on my own. I go by myself because I might sense loss and regret in my father's silence if we surveyed the landscape together; I go by myself because I want to grieve alone.

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The distinction between the historical and mythical cowboy is difficult to delineate. According to Walter Prescott Webb, a frontier historian of the early 1900s, cowboys as myths can be described as a man that: Lives on horseback as do the Bedouins; he fights on horseback, as did the knights of chivalry; he goes armed with a strange new weapon which he uses ambidextrously and precisely; he swears like a trooper, drinks like a fish, wears clothes like an actor, and fights like a devil.Â Most of the cowboy myth was initially propagated in literature. Aside from larger print novels, the greatest influence can be traced from the success of the dime novel. Dime novels were published works of fiction popularized in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Thereâ€™s an inherent romanticism to the cowboy archetype: a restless wanderer, perpetually in search of his next heroic adventure somewhere in the American southwest. Billy Joe Shaver turned that idea upside down in his 1981 song â€œWe Are the Cowboys,â€ pointing out that cowboys are just average folks of all stripes â€” â€œTexicans, Mexicans, black men and Jewsâ€” â€” and their heroism comes in fighting everyday injustices, from hunger to violence. Willie Nelson covers the song on his upcoming album, First Rose of Spring, and released a video for the track on Friday.