Connecting City and Country in the Prairie Landscape of Sharon Butala

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Separation of the country and the city, and ultimately acceptance of the former and rejection of the latter, occur throughout the work of prairie author, Sharon Butala. She relies on this separation to denigrate the city and privilege the country in promoting the protection of at-risk environments such as native grassland, the landscape that nurtured her development as both a person and an author after she moved from Saskatoon to a ranch near Eastend in 1976. This article, focusing on some of Butala's early short stories, her novel Luna, and her non-fiction manifesto, Lilac Moon: Dreaming of the Real West, questions the utility of this separation, for nowadays there is greatly increased interaction between city and country, and it is better to work cooperatively in protecting our shared home. And, since four-fifths of prairie people are urban dwellers rather than rural dwellers, it is time that their lives are part of the record of "the real west."

KEY WORDS: Southwestern Saskatchewan, “The Real West”, Protection of Native Prairie, Urban versus Rural Life, Luna, Lilac Moon

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In the spring of 1976, Sharon Butala moved from complex city life in Saskatoon to simple country life near Eastend, in the southwestern corner of Saskatchewan; she moved from academia in the ivory tower to horseback riding on the Butala ranchland; and she began the process of forsaking her old life as a city woman and adopting her new life as a country woman. As Butala admits in her best-selling book, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (1994b), this change was neither quick nor easy. An urban person does not become a rural person simply by moving from city to country, and for some time and with much pain Butala tried to leave behind her old life and fit into her new life. As she puts it, “I found myself in another country where I didn’t speak the language or know the customs, where I was an outsider, an intruder, an alien, where I was alone” (76). To the local people, she was the strange other, just as they were to her. Even four years after moving to the ranch, Butala wrote in her journal that “I feel invisible here and dead” (77). The move triggered, in her terms, a great “psychic struggle” and much “mental anguish” (76, 83), and it took her years to work through “a major life crisis” and start “to feel at home in the terrain” (191, 99). When her “apprenticeship” was done, more than fifteen years after moving to the country, the urban materialist had morphed into the rural spiritualist, developed a numinous connection with nature/the land, and come “at last to understand my life as a part of, as a manifestation of, that larger life by which I felt myself to be surrounded” (191). Butala had reached the point of congruence—an important word in the book—among body, spirit, and landscape. The message in *The Perfection of the Morning* that we humans need to see ourselves as a part of, not apart from, nature, and that we must preserve or restore, rather than damage or destroy, fragile ecosystems such as native prairie before we break all ties with our elemental humanity strongly appealed to general Canadian readers (if not all academic Canadian readers).

About two years after her move from urban life to rural life—partly to pass the time, partly to record her dreams, visions, and inexplicable experiences while out walking on the prairie, partly to cope with her midlife crisis—Butala began to write. She claims that she would not have become a writer at all had she not moved into the prairie landscape (1994b:168), and writing became instrumental in her development as a person and in her interaction with that landscape (xvi). Her eventual identity, then, was not only a country woman but also a country author, and, with physical and
temporal separation from the city, she came increasingly in her writing to ignore or dismiss it. The country comes to take the stage; the city starts to fade from view. “In moving to the country,” Alison Calder (2002:169) indicates, “it was possible for her [Butala] to leave the city behind.” Absence of the city, as Ian Adam (1998:181, 185) notes, discussing one of her short stories and mentioning The Perfection of the Morning, is “the ultimate dismissal”; the city, he says, is the “absent other.” In Calder’s terms, it has undergone “erasure” or “exclusion” (169). It is the place left behind or kept at bay, the place of evil, the place where ranchers and farmers fear to tread (and drive). It is the place of Butala’s former urban and non-writerly self.

Erasure of the city and adoption of the country run throughout Butala’s work and ultimately trump moments of ambivalence, which are more pronounced in her early work, before her training was finished and her bonding was secured. And these aspects have become more evident, to the point where, in her essentialist manifesto Lilac Moon: Dreaming of the Real West (2005), in which her mission is to capture “the essence” of western Canada (203), specifically the prairie provinces, the city has all but vanished, for “the real west,” according to Butala, is rural as opposed to urban. “Today far more people in Western Canada have an urban background than a rural one,” she admits, yet she claims that “we remain a people whose collective memory and whose myths are strictly rural” (42). She recaps this statement near the end of the book: “Despite our now-great cities and our emptying countryside where once the opposite was true—small cities and bustling countryside—the West is still, or is once again, about land” (215).

Echoing Sue Sorensen (2008:15), though, one might ask (and try to answer) this question: “But why all this about rural existence, when, as we all know, the majority of prairie people are now urban?” (see also Banfing 2008:52). So my mission here—after discussing a number of Butala’s early short stories, her novel Luna (1988) extensively, and her novel The Garden of Eden (1998) briefly—is to assess how well the prairie west as portrayed in Lilac Moon holds in the here and now. I hope to show that, as in the pastoral paradigm, separation of city and country, and ultimately rejection of the former and acceptance of the latter, underpin Butala’s call for protection of at-risk environments such as the native prairie that fostered her growth as both a person and an author. But in the end stressing this separation, which today is questionable, does more harm than good. For some time now, “old dirt track[s]” (Sorensen 2008:18) have been replaced by “straight hardtop
roads” (Symons 1975:103) that have greatly connected rather than divided city and country, and it is more productive to emphasize cooperation between rural folk and city folk, for all of us need to become better stewards of our shared home.

**Early Ambivalence**

In her early writing, when Butala was still working through her move out of the city and into the country, when she had not fully left behind the city but had not really bonded with the country, an ambivalent dialectic between the two is present, largely in terms of setting and lifestyle. At times, neither city nor country wins the day, for both have their faults. Consider “The Mission,” the first short story in her first collection, *Queen of the Headaches* (1985). The story alternates abruptly between the current setting, a prairie farm, and the flashback setting, Halifax, where the narrator lived years earlier. Life there was difficult for her, yet she is not quite in her element in the country either. All her friends, she notes, are the wives of other farmers, but she soon corrects herself: “Actually I have no friends in the country. Just women who are suspicious of me and who dislike me but are curious about me and my probably disreputable past” (2). Clearly there are parallels here with Butala’s experience of moving from Saskatoon to the ranch near Eastend, as recounted in *The Perfection of the Morning*.

The ambivalent dialectic is also present in “O What Venerable and Reverend Creatures,” also collected in *Queen of the Headaches*. Meredith Gilchrist, who grew up on a ranch in southwestern Saskatchewan but has lived in Toronto for the past twenty years and been a chemistry professor there for the past fifteen years (106), returns home for her mother’s funeral. “Each time she returned home,” the narrator notes, “she was grateful that she had escaped the hardship, the male chauvinism, the ignorance” of the ranching community (107). Although city living ostensibly has been good for Meredith, the same cannot be said for her eighteen-year-old daughter, Stacey, who has caused her parents much disappointment and has a very strained relationship with them. In Toronto, she gets into the usual trouble with sex and drugs, truancy, running away from home. Her parents drag her westward to the funeral and into the country, and after only two weeks there, helping to chase and feed cattle and even helping to pull a calf, Stacey is a changed person. The story is a mini “wilderness plot” (see Calder 2002:165): leaving behind a harmful urban environment, Stacey enters a
remote rural environment, begins to bond with the landscape and its creatures, starts to become a better person, and decides to remain there to help her aging grandfather, now a widower, a rancher who would be so out of place in Toronto that he would perish there (117). In the country, whether readers believe this or not, Stacey seems quickly to have found a sense of purpose, a degree of responsibility, and her parents return to the city without her.

Also a mini “wilderness plot” is the story “Eden” in the same collection. Elinor, after the painful death of her father from stomach cancer, flies from Toronto to Regina and then drives southwest, all in the same day, to the farm of Harold and Ellen Hackett, a stereotypical farming couple. Her mother, who grew up in the area, has asked the Hacketts if Elinor could come for a visit, more or less a retreat, to put her father’s death behind her. Elinor, coming across a disembowelled rat on the farm, vomits at the sight, for it reminds her of her father’s ordeal; Mrs. Hackett attributes her reaction to her urban status: “I imagine a person can live forever in the city and not see a thing die [though Elinor has just seen her father die],” she said. Concrete all over everything. Little squares of grass the size of a postage stamp. The smell so bad even the birds got more sense than to stay around” (152). The city is equally stereotyped. The Hacketts are amazed whenever Elinor comments on city life. As she writes to her mother, they have “no conception” of such a life: “It is beyond them to imagine that anyone would ever deliberately choose to live in the city. They feel sorry for anybody who has to live in the city. They think city-dwellers are people who were driven out of the Garden of Eden” (156–57). It is safe to assume that many such city dwellers would find it just as hard to imagine that anyone would willingly choose to live in the country, especially if he or she had to live as the Hacketts do.

Of the fourteen stories in Queen of the Headaches, five are set in the country, five are set in the city, and four are set in both country and city. This balance is likely not intentional and reflects, rather, Butala writing her way out of her old urban world and into her new rural world. But the bonds to the old world have not yet been completely severed, while the ties to the new world have not yet been securely attached.

Although it was difficult for Butala to move from the city to the country and feel at home there, she notes it is just as hard to go the other way, for rural people (such as Stacey’s grandpa) to adapt to city living. Butala admits
in *Lilac Moon* that, when she and her sisters were growing up in rural northeastern Saskatchewan, in the bush near Nipawin, they “couldn’t wait to shake the dust of [the] prairie small-town from our shoes. We would hit the cities, the bigger the better, we would become fully urban, forget we’d ever known the countryside ...” (2005:44–45). It was not that easy to shake off the country dust, though, “For it is one thing to live in a city geographically and quite another to live in it mentally, to embrace it wholeheartedly as the best way of life ...” (43). Indeed, “the truly rural can live in the city a greater part of their lives and yet never see it” because they look at things differently, have a different “state of mind” (44), what Butala terms “the rural mindset” (46). So she also places country folk in the city to contrast rural and urban lifestyles and explore her ambivalent relationship with both the city and the country. Always, though, the scenes are filtered through that mindset.

In the highly ambivalent and self-reflexive story, “Saskatchewan,” first published in *Canadian Fiction Magazine* in 1992 and collected in *Real Life: Short Stories* (Butala 2003 [2002]), Jenna Messer has not been “a city girl” for three decades (92); in fact, like Butala herself, she is an author who lives in rural Saskatchewan, far from any city, “on a real working ranch, [and she] has a real cowboy for a husband who comes in with manure on his boots and hay stuck in his clothes” (93). Her isolated rurality is perceived as “a personal failing” or “an inexplicable character flaw” by city folk in the publishing industry (93), especially those in Toronto, to which Jenna flies from Regina. She spends a few days in Toronto obliging her publisher by performing writerly tasks such as interviews, bookstore visits, and a public reading. Toronto, so different from her remote prairie ranch as to be its opposing binary, both attracts and repels her (106), awakens in her memories both good and bad. “It feels good to be marching down a city sidewalk again, ... as if she belongs here.... [H]er youthful days in one [Saskatoon] return to her and she feels happy and at home” (96–97). Yet these feelings soon pass, “and a darker mood ... overtakes her every time she comes here” (97; see also 110), the “rage” that she, author from the country, to be successful, has to scale the wall of “big-city indifference, big-city arrogance” (97). But the significant revelation comes next: “[I]n her country home she’s still seen as the city woman—never will be anything else—while here she’s classified as purely country. Worst of all, she can’t tell herself any more which is closest to the truth” (97). Long ago a city girl, not yet a
country woman, Jenna is caught between the urban and the rural, her sense of belonging uncertain. While in Toronto, she goes to a movie one evening, but even this “last hold on her former city-self is disintegrating. About this, she alternates between being discomfited and relieved” (98). By the end of her trip, Jenna is eager to leave Toronto, and as she flies back to Saskatchewan she knows that she is back at home (110). So ultimately, after much ambivalence about where she really belongs, she feels more at home in the country, and the city, it seems, has been left behind for good. She now knows her place.

Butala’s characters inhabit a world of oppositional self-identity: eventually they have to be, or choose to be, urban people or rural people, depending on where they happen to be living, city or country. It seems that they cannot transcend this simplistic binary. For them, as for Butala herself, place therefore becomes a foundational determinant of identity. She was a country girl growing up near Nipawin; she was a young city woman studying and working in Saskatoon and Halifax; she was a middle-aged country woman ranching and writing near Eastend; she is now an older city woman (or perhaps still a displaced country woman) living in Calgary. After her husband, Peter, died in 2007, she moved from the ranch near Eastend to Calgary to be closer to family members, but she views this move as “temporary” (Butala 2009). Butala has spent much of her life in the city and much of it in the country, so she is well versed in the good and the bad of each.

Rural versus Urban Life

In *Luna* (1994a [1988]), the debate over which is the better life—rural versus urban—takes centre stage. The novel is a feminist assessment of rural women’s society in which older sister Selena represents a traditional rural woman, whereas younger sister Diane\(^6\) represents a dissatisfied rural woman. Diane is blunt about her great unhappiness: “I’m sick of this place. I’m sick of this life” (32). Her husband quit university to come back and, in Selena’s words, “live this good life here on the land”; Diane instantly questions, “What good life?” (34). She yearns for much more than raising kids, doing chores, cleaning house, tending the garden, struggling financially, and she expects to fill the void in the city, where to her there is more work, more culture, more services, more satisfaction. Among the
women of her insular surroundings, she is alone in expressing an interest in
the world beyond the daily routines of ranching and farming (see 81).

Auntie Rhea, one of Butala's most memorable characters, questions
Diane about her expectations—“What do you think you’ll find in the blessed
city?”—to which Diane shouts, laconically, “Life!” (73). Selena has difficulty
imagining such a life: “city life—how could you live it, except running,
running all the time, in the traffic and the bad smells, never feeling safe ... ”
(33; ellipsis in the original; see also Butala 1992:65). In fact, she is “appalled”
that Diane is seriously considering a move to the city, and she inveighs
against life there, which will include sending her two daughters to daycare
and spending little time with them, getting an “awful” job that pays poorly,
and living in an “awful” apartment; Selena ends the diatribe by mentioning
that, “Anyway, everybody knows what the city’s like” (35). Diane will also
be cut off from friends and family, surrounded by people who will not care
about her (55), who will be “just as unhappy” as she is; “You’ll find that out,”
Selena warns her (56).

Diane ignores these stereotypical assumptions and persuades her
reluctant husband to put their farm up for sale and move to Saskatoon before
they go completely broke. After only a dozen days there, she claims that “It
feels like home to me” (86), and she tries to “rise” and “merge” with “the
muted, hollow roar of the city,” but screeching tires disrupt her soaring
attempt, and she is back in “the hot, stuffy room” of their apartment (87).
Soon Diane gets the first of three paltry-paying and obviously unfulfilling
jobs working “the graveyard shift” in a doughnut shop; Selena thinks that,
ironically, “She could have gotten a terrible job with bad pay in Chinook [a
neighbouring town], she didn’t have to go to the city for that” (92). This
job is followed by stints as a record store clerk and a radio station copy
writer. Diane also takes night classes and generally has “the time of her life”
attending cultural events (153); she claims, indeed, to “love” life in the city
(99). Her husband, Tony, exclaims to Selena that Diane is “just so damn
excited. You’d think the city was paradise” (103).

But all is not as rosy as it appears in the city. Diane finds her first job
exhausting, and she encounters “some pretty ugly things” in the doughnut
shop, such as “[l]ost teenagers, ... pale and sickly-looking and sort of evil
under all that paint and weird hair and bizarre clothes,” and people whom
she is certain are “criminals” (96; see also 159). Selena, from her rural bias,
paints a bleaker picture of the doughnut eaters and coffee drinkers: “drug
addicts, drunks, thieves, runaways” (146). For Tony, life in the city is far less than perfect. Although his nine-to-five job brings in more money than farming ever did, he misses being outdoors, the farming life (100), “home” (149). And their two young girls, just as Selena foretold, end up spending more time in daycare or with neighbours than with their parents. All in all, according to Selena, this is “a rotten situation” (101).

She sees Diane after she has been in the city six weeks, and she is sure that her sister has lost weight and, “like city women,” wears too much makeup (97). The “brightness” of her face seems “unnatural” to Selena, and “the same dark longing” or restlessness seems to hover above her exuberance (99). To Selena, Diane looks “thin and exhausted” and “too wound-up” (105). The elder (rural) sister simply cannot fathom the selfish quest of the younger (now urban) sister, a quest that is “incomprehensible” to Selena (188) and seems to offer, judging from Diane’s state, diminishing returns. For a moment, the country offers Diane beauty and solace—“It’s so beautiful here. My God, it’s beautiful. And peaceful.... How could I want to leave such perfect beauty and peace, she asks herself” (107)—but soon her restiveness reappears, and clearly these aspects of nature, though sufficient for some, cannot fulfill her unnamed desire (108).

Inevitably and predictably Diane and Tony separate; he quits his job, she moves to another apartment, and he returns to the farm with the girls. As he tells Selena, “When I thought of all the rest of my working years like that [living in the city]. I couldn’t stand it. And she wouldn’t come back with me” (165). He returns home, the city having claimed his wife. For Selena, “divorces and broken homes” are symptomatic of the city, of its harried lifestyle, and “At least out here families are still families” (185).

But all is not as rosy as it appears in the country either. When the isolated rural community gathers for some social function or other, the illusion is of timelessness and harmony, “as if there were no hardship, no injustice, no ugliness, no evil” (55). Diane, while still working in the doughnut shop, writes to Selena that “There must be despair and evil at home too. But I never noticed it, and I can’t understand why” (96), and greater exposure to life and all its vicissitudes seems to be the reason why Diane goes to the city in the first place (97). But surely she knows that farmers left and right, north and south, of Mallard are losing their farms or struggling to keep up payments, as she and Tony did. Selena notes in a letter to Diane some of the hardships in the country: since the post office in Mallard has closed, Kent,
Selena’s husband, has to drive about twenty-five miles on a grid road to Chinook to pick up their mail; another neighbouring family has “sold out,” getting out just “ahead of the bank takeover”; and “more and more houses are sitting empty around here” (215). Kent says about his cow-calf operation, which obviously has incurred large debts, “I guess I’ll stick it out to the bitter end” (202), hoping to avoid, in Selena’s words, the “fate” of neighbours who have lost their farms or ranches and gone to cities to try “to eke out an existence in a strange environment” (137). A life in the country might offer beauty and solace, but it might not pay the bills, so Selena’s observation is ironic; those country folk still living in the country are trying “to eke out an existence in a [familiar] environment.” Were ranching and farming to pay better returns, there would be no need for them to relocate to cities in search of better livelihoods.

There is even greater darkness in the country. There is isolation that leads to great loneliness that results in “madness,” even for the stalwart Rhea (208). She recounts how, as a young housewife and mother, “Alone, day after day, with the wind and sky, the grass and the wild things” (208), she “wandered over the prairie” for hours on end, to the point where she shirked her many duties and forgot about her kids, and her husband, “despairing,” would send them out to find their mother and bring her back home (209). Worse, Phoebe, Selena’s daughter, is raped by her boyfriend (ironically at one of the community’s social functions), becomes pregnant, and decides to stay at home and give birth rather than attend university in Regina. And there are hints of spousal abuse so severe that it leads to suicide.

A few times throughout the novel Selena has Diane-like moments, fed up with her rural lifestyle, “wanting neither the outdoors nor the house, wanting suddenly, like Diane, to get in the car and drive away,” though she wonders, instantly, “Away to where? To do what?” (163). Perhaps, she allows, Diane is right, even though she is “trailing behind her an abandoned home, a lost husband” (185). Selena then wishes that she lived in a city and “had an easy life,” but her “rural mindset” (to use Butala’s phrase) is quickly restored: “No, she didn’t wish that” (185–86). Later she ponders whether she could achieve “freedom” by moving to a city, again like Diane, leaving behind her rural habits and duties, but she quickly rejects this notion: “But I hate the city, I hate the smell, it frightens me, everything happens too fast there” (207).
Weather is a significant factor in *Luna* in the distinction between rural life and urban life. During the long, frigid, and harrowing ride to round up the cattle and bring them home for the winter months, Selena has plenty of time to reflect on “her lot” as “a rancher’s wife” in the context of severe weather (170), and her musings are worth quoting at length:

[I]t would be nice to live a life where they didn’t have to do things like this. Like in the city, she thought, people just catch the bus to work every day, stay inside warm buildings all the time, never really feel the cold, never really have to be afraid of the weather. People in the city have never known what it’s like to have that thrill of fear that if you get careless, let your guard down, or have some bad luck like getting caught in an unexpected blizzard, you might actually die, right then and there. (182)

Diane seems to both confirm and dispute this distinction. On the one hand, she is too “busy” and “protected” in the city to notice the late-summer heat (98); on the other, waiting at a bus stop, she finds that she feels the cold more in the city than she did in the country (155). Living in the country also necessitates driving great distances, as when Selena used to drive Phoebe thirty miles for piano lessons, many of which they “missed because of bad weather or bad roads” (101). And Selena nearly misses the birth of Phoebe’s baby because of such weather and such roads (a spring equinox snow squall), exclaiming—uncharacteristically—“This damn country!” ... ‘Sometimes I hate it!’” (234). These are strong words coming from someone who believes that in the country, hard lifestyle and bad weather and all, “At least here you know you are alive ... ,” and she feels “the utter, undeniable truth of it settle into her” (186). So once again, after a brief mental excursion to the city, Selena is—and feels that she belongs—back in the country.

The novel ends with a letter to Selena from Diane, who writes from the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, obviously having quit her job (or been fired) and left the city, travelling now in the country likely in search of the fulfillment that the city did not, in fact, bring. In terms of the oscillation in *Luna* between country and city, this development is significant, for Diane goes from country to city to country; more than that, she observes both the hardship and the beauty of the native women in the Yucatán area, and she admits to her sister that “my respect for the women I grew up with [around Mallard and Chinook] has grown. I may not have been entirely wrong, but I wasn’t entirely right, either” (246). The final sentence of the letter and thus
of the novel is this: “I am going further and further into the jungle” (246). In other words, Diane is heading farther and farther away from the city, and in *Luna* the pendulum of decision between city and country comes to rest on the latter. In fact, in this novel, in which the debate between country and city is so prominent, only one brief scene (three pages long) is actually set in Saskatoon, and other tidbits of city life come to us from Diane’s letters as filtered through “the rural mindset” of Selena. So the city truly is the “absent other.”

The same subtext is in the novel, *The Garden of Eden* (Butala 1998); the city is there only in a few short scenes and as the despised other. Iris Christie, on a mission to find her long-lost niece, travels from her large farm in southwestern Saskatchewan through increasingly large and strange cities: Medicine Hat, where the people in a mall “look faintly alien” to her (139); Calgary, whose expansion and commotion baffle and frighten her, where she recoils from “the stink and roar of traffic, the crowds of shoppers, the banks of pock-marked, blackened snow, the billowing clouds of ice fog like some filmmaker’s notion of hell” (155); Toronto, which “overwhelm[s]” her with its “muddle”—its “streets thick with people of all races” and its “incessant din and rush of ... traffic” (191); and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the pinnacle of otherness, which “stuns” her (213) with its noise and filth, commotion and pollution, poverty and shabbiness. Iris views cities in general as being “full of psychopaths and predators” (149), while Abubech Tefera, a feminist agricultural researcher in Ethiopia, views them as leading to starvation and prostitution (168–69). For these women, to go from country to city is to go from good to bad or, when times are hard, from bad to worse.

**Little City, Mostly Country**

And now to *Lilac Moon* (Butala 2005). To judge a book by its covers, the city is missing from the prairie landscape. The front cover depicts a country road between fields; the back cover presents more of the same. The ratio of sky to land in the photo is three-quarters to one-quarter, and absent are people and buildings. There are no fence lines, no power poles, no cars, and no trucks. Just the country. Here we have, as *Who Has Seen the Wind* so memorably begins, “the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky” (Mitchell 1991 [1947]:3). The covers
are clearly rural as opposed to urban. Is “the real west,” then, also rural? Judging by the covers, one must say yes.

Such covers succumb to “popular expectations about prairie writing” (Calder 2002:169). They pander to the “public desire for images of a rural, depopulated, and ahistorical prairie,” and Calder lists some coffee table and children’s books in support of this claim (182n6); to her list we could add many other books. The front cover of Courting Saskatchewan, by David Carpenter (1996), depicts an old farm building amid a parcel of prairie surrounded by grain fields and overarched by a blue sky. That of Rediscovering the Prairies: Journeys by Dog, Horse, and Canoe, by Norman Henderson (2005), presents grass, sky, clouds. The front cover of the Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: A Living Legacy (2005) is a collage of grassland hills, farmland fields, and northland lakes; any hint of the urban—not to mention people—is absent. That of New Moon at Batoche: Reflections on the Urban Prairie, by George Melnyk (1999), foregrounds a picnic table against prairie and requisite blue—the bluest—sky (and this for a book about “the urban prairie”). For Melnyk’s book, would it not have been more appropriate to portray Winnipeg or Saskatoon or Calgary from a grassland or farmland distance? Where is the city in the prairie? In the past half century or more, the “enforced” movement of rural people to urban centres, a massive migration that people in the Prairies are still “mourning” apparently (Butala 2005:42), has created “an urban reading public sensitive to, even nostalgic for, the perceptions of prairie writing” (Adam 1998:185), and shrewd publishers have capitalized on this nostalgia by depicting on book covers the basics of the prairie landscape, whether grassland or farmland. Butala’s own publisher, HarperCollins, has done so to great success (see the covers of all of her non-fiction books and especially the cover of The Garden of Eden).

Is the city any more present, then, between the covers of Lilac Moon? The five major cities of the prairie region receive a cursory discussion of their founding (40–42), accompanied by four endnotes on their population statistics over the years and an endnote on the changing percentage of rural population versus urban population in the region (239–41); in early days, it was about 80 percent rural and 20 percent urban; nowadays, thanks to rural depopulation, the percentages are reversed (see also 209–11). There is also an endnote on some of the cultural achievements of these cities (246–47).
Left in the text are sporadic denouncements of cities or occasional comparisons of country life/people and city life/people.

Early in the account (5), Saskatoon is depicted as a city where Native people are left to freeze to death at the outskirts (a shameful chapter in the history of Saskatoon that Butala broached a few years earlier in the darkly titled story “Winterkill,” collected in Real Life [2003 (2002)]). Sharon and Peter travel to Edmonton one year for the Canadian Finals Rodeo, and for her, if not for him, this is “a not-to-be-missed shopping opportunity” (12), surely at the West Edmonton Mall; other than this mention, the city has no real presence. And Butala seems to have a strong aversion to Calgary. The expansion of Calgary, now “a bustling metropolis,” is depicted as destructive, “eating up the prairie faster than a wildfire” (45, 41), and apparently everyone in the prairie region hates the place: “even Calgarians deplore it” (45). The city is simply too large, and both the traffic and the crime rate are beyond control (45).

Butala wonders in Lilac Moon whether she could describe a typical day in a prairie city, and she supposes she could, but doing so would be redundant because “Most Canadians live in cities, and our television, movies, and radio assume all their listeners and viewers are urban—so everybody knows what a day in the life of a city is like” (9–10; cf. Banting 2008:50; and Sorensen 2008:16). It is the country (for these city dwellers) that is the exotic or curious other. Butala then wonders whether western Canadian cities are different from eastern Canadian cities, and she thinks they are but leaves it at that (10), as though she cannot be bothered to indicate the distinctions, though near the end of the book she claims that the former are trying to be like the latter (220).

And, “like rural-dwellers everywhere,” Butala pities city people because their views of the sky are frequently obstructed by buildings, and anyway they are too busy rushing about to stop and look at the sky (4). This distinction is undermined, though, when a radio announcer in Regina comments on the beauty of the early morning light (4), so at least this urban dweller has both the view and the time to glance up, and his on-air remark would stir others to do likewise. Butala is on her way to Shaunavon, and when she gets there she becomes “like any urbanite” and focuses on her task at hand (picking up a laptop and printer) “instead of the landscape and the wonderful sky” (5).
There are a few other comparisons in *Lilac Moon*. General perceptions, according to Butala, are that rural women work harder than urban women (156); that city dwellers and country dwellers do not speak the same language, so the former would not fathom, for instance, cowboy poetry (195); and that urban people are more sheltered than rural people from bad weather, especially the harshness of winter, driving from heated garage to covered parkade and trudging along “heated walkways” from store to store (208–09).

Mostly, then, the city is missing in *Lilac Moon*. It plays but a small role in Butala’s project of defining the prairie west and its people. It is absent because it is despised. Rural people, according to Butala, harbour a “continuing disapproval of cities” (44): “they’re unbearably noisy, disgustingly smelly and dirty, laughably expensive; their people are always in a panting hurry, without the slightest regard for any other human being; and ... they are vastly dangerous” (45)."To rural people,” indeed, “… real life takes place only out in the country ... ,” while life in the city is “a sham” (44; see also Calder 2002:169; and Melnyk 1999:103–04). That is not the end of it: “For rural people, there is no excuse for cities and no explanation at all for their modus operandi” (46).

Clearly Butala’s dream of the prairie west does not include cities; it is a dream not of “the real west” but of the old west, including bison, many of them, grazing on pure grassland or roaring by, “the music of the wild West” (27). And the endpapers of *Lilac Moon* are a photo of some of the purebred bison, along with horses and riders herding them, on the Old Man on His Back (OMB) Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area in southwestern Saskatchewan, a project in which Sharon and Peter were involved (see 218–21)."Bison and cowboys on unspoiled prairie: the image takes us back more than a century. Ultimately the cowboys themselves have to go, for “real life” in the prairie landscape is pre-contact, “the one [world] that was here before the first European set foot on it” (220). Decidedly anti-city, unflinchingly anti-modern, is the prairie west in the dreams of Butala nearly thirty years after her move to the country. By this time, she was unequivocally a country woman and a country author. The “rural mindset” was entrenched; the ambivalence was over; the city was denied.

What did critics—some of whom have always lived in cities—think of the short shrift that cities receive in *Lilac Moon*? I tracked down a number of reviews of the book, and surprisingly only one complains about the
treatment of cities in it. Linda Goyette (2005), writing for *Canadian Geographic*, notices that Butala “barely begins to explore urban lives or attitudes. City dwellers, including the majority of aboriginal Westerners, will wonder at times whether she is writing about them. They inhabit a ‘real West’ of downtown office towers, expanding suburbs, the freeway at rush hour and malls that maul the landscape.” For them, purebred bison roaming unspoiled prairie belong in a Paul Kane painting of the nineteenth century, and cowboys are oddly attired riders of bulls and broncs and wrestlers of steers at the annual Calgary Stampede.

Two other reviews are worth noting. An acerbic review is that by Patricia Robertson (2005), and it is significant that she is a rural Saskatchewan writer denouncing another rural Saskatchewan writer (in the context of western Canadians versus central Canadians) in the pages of the *Toronto Star*. Robertson dismisses *Lilac Moon* as a “regionalist rant” in which “... Butala trots out every stale argument, old grudge and petty grievance between Western Canada and ‘The East.’ ...” Such a rant stems from “an outdated Western inferiority complex” and makes Robertson grind her teeth in exasperation. She warns potential readers to “steer clear” of this “bitter account.” Yet in all this she raises no concern, not a hint, that Butala has mostly erased the city from the map of the prairie west. And Trevor Herriot (2005), an avid birder and author who lives in Regina “but goes to the country to find the best things,” reviewed *Lilac Moon* for the *Globe and Mail*, calling the book “an important contribution” because of “its articulation of what it means to be rural in this time and place.” The absent city, and what it means to be urban in the here and now, apparently do not concern him. Like Butala, he privileges the country over the city.

**Ending the Bias**

To some Canadians, “it is a surprise to find that [prairie people] too have also always been urban,” never rural, and for Butala herself this was a “belated insight” (2005:39). Indeed, some of those who have lived in cities all their lives are irked that they have been “unacknowledged and without status in ... prairie mythology” (39), as in *Lilac Moon*. Adam (1998:186) argues against the dominance of rural icons over urban ones in western Canadian writing, and Melnyk (1999), in a couple of essays collected in *New Moon at Batoche* (published before *Lilac Moon*), directly challenges Butala and the country/city or nature/culture split in the prairie context.
In his first essay, “The Five City-States of the West: A Prairie Fantasy,” Melnyk, an “urban dweller” all his life, conveys his disappointment with “the limited role” of cities in portrayals of the region; cities, in fact, are an “afterthought” (87) if not completely “forgotten” (88). As he notes, “In the search for what is truly Western, the prairie city has been systematically ignored and set aside” (100). For a century or more, “prairie identity” has been rural rather than urban, equated with “the land outside the city” (88). For Melnyk, as for so many city dwellers now who view the region “through urban eyes” (90), it is time to end the ancient bias against cities and grant them their rightful place in regional identity formation. “Is regional identity purely land-based?” he wonders (91), and, pace Butala, he decides a few pages later that “The land cannot be the sole arbiter of our identity …” (100). Like most Canadians, western Canadians these days are “an urban people,” and “This fact must be recognized” (100), so the prairie landscape should share the spotlight with the prairie city. Veneration of the country/pioneer should occur alongside recognition of the city/urbanite.

In his second essay, “The Urban Prairie: Between Jerusalem and Babylon,” an apologia for the intermingling of city and nature, Melnyk asserts that “anti-urban” sentiment, so prevalent in society, has placed the city at one pole (bad) and nature at the other (good). This polarity is bogus, he claims, for “From the beginning nature has been part of the urban landscape ...” of any western Canadian city “more ... than we imagine” (109, 106); in fact, it “penetrates to the core” (111). Yet, if nature is part of the city, it is but a small part, as in Calgary (113). Melnyk concludes that, “as long as the natural prairie remains an integral part of urban life in the West, the city can call itself a sacred centre of regional identity” (115).

It would be hard to convince Christine in Butala’s short story “Night Class” that there is much nature in the city. For her, nature is outside the city, even a city as small as Saskatoon, and she regrets that her children are “growing up without ever seeing nature,” which to them would be “a whole new dimension of life” (2003 [2002]:16). In Lilac Moon, though, Butala (2005:48) seems to support Melnyk when she claims that “The sense ... of nature is very strong in Western [Canadian] cities ...,” and she attributes the existence of natural elements in these cities to “the inherent character” of prairie people, “affecting even the most urban of us.” In other words, since so many people living in prairie cities have come from the land over the years, these cities reflect the values of these people and contain more
patches of nature than, say, eastern Canadian cities. These people have moved to the cities for employment, education, better health care, family connections, whatever, but they have brought the land with them, so to speak, if in tiny patches, and this claim is tied to Butala's argument that “the West is still, or is once again, about land”—its protection and stewardship.

Raymond Williams, in The Country and the City, his classic study of the history and literature of rural England, notes that “A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (1975 [1973]:1), and “certain images and associations [both positive and negative] persist” (1–2). In the pastoral tradition, it often comes down to a reductionist bleating of COUNTRY GOOD, CITY BAD, but surely such a spurious platitude can and should be contested. Leo Marx (1967 [1964]:114) advises that we should adopt “no trite antithesis” between rural and urban; Sherrill Grace (1984:194) points out that “this constant opposition between city and country is not a simplistic matter of good and bad, positive and negative”; the relationship between them, as Adam (1998:186) notes, is, or should be seen as, a “two-way” “exchange.” The flow goes both ways: city people travel to the country for retreat, recreation, brushes with nature; country people travel to the city to work, shop, imbibe some culture. The links among farm-village-town-city were forged in the pioneer period and have remained intact since then, as Butala admits in Lilac Moon (2005:40).

Yet the distinct separation of country and city is key to the pastoral paradigm, on which Butala relies in her endeavour to define the prairie west. In the end in Lilac Moon, the barely present city is made not of concrete and asphalt but of straw (handy enough in the prairie region), set up only to be toppled, and what readers generally expect of prairie writing is maintained, while the integrity, even sanctity, of the pastoral paradigm is preserved. So it simply would not do to depict the city on the covers or to devote much space to it between the covers. Their nostalgia would be compromised, their memories disrupted, their expectations frustrated. The assumption here, of course, is that these readers are those whose lives have not been “wholly urban” (Butala 2005:39), but it is no longer safe to make that assumption.

Butala, writing now for many years, admits that she too “failed to include any notion of the urban in my understanding of who [prairie people] are” (2005:40). “The ‘Dream of the West’ in this book,” as Megan Riley
McGilchrist (2007:469) points out in a short review, “is a dream of land as it ought to be” or once was. Butala admits as much toward the end of Lilac Moon: “That was the West once, but for a very long time it has not been the West” (2005:208). She is “dreaming” in this book, after all, of the ideal west or the former west. In that west, cities are absent; in the new west, they are not, and their status should be not denied but affirmed. Reality for urban dwellers is far different from that for rural dwellers bred, born, raised, and living still in the country. Those in the cities are more familiar with shopping malls and skyscrapers than rolling grasslands and vast fields. When 80 percent of people in the prairie region now live in cities, surely their lives and their dreams should make up a large portion of the account.

Butala reluctantly admits in Lilac Moon that “our collective memories are becoming urban in nature” (2005:207), “cosmopolitan” (213), and dreams other than hers are becoming the norm (222). Perhaps, then, it is time to stop pining for “that lost Eden” (207)—“the damaging and foolish Eden myth,” in the words of Sorensen (2008:24), that entranced so many early settlers of the prairie region—and not divide but connect country and city and, in the process, work cooperatively to protect our home.

References


——. 2009, August 11. Email to the author.

Endnotes

1 I realize that these are essentialized categories that are likely to be contested, but they are among numerous such binaries in Butala’s work, including nature/culture, rancher/farmer, and central Canadian/western Canadian. There is even “such a thing as a Saskatchewan face” in contrast to, say, a Nova Scotia face, which Butala presumably encountered when she lived in Halifax for about four years in the latter 1960s (2005:xii). The former face she recognized instantly on her return to her “homeland” (xi).

2 See Calder (2002), Kamboureli (2001), and Lousley (2001) on The Perfection of the Morning and Kerber (2003) on The Garden of Eden. Butala seems to be a target among deconstructive critics for her apparent lack of theoretical sophistication and passé prairie realism. See, however, Banting (2008:57–69), who defends Butala against such attacks. Perhaps it is difficult for some urban academics to fathom and accept that another urban academic would willingly leave the city and the academy, move to a remote ranch, take on a rural life, and become a best-selling author.

3 We might wonder how that is possible. In fact, this announcement is turned on its head later in the book when Butala admits that western Canada is changing, becoming more urban, as are “our collective memories” (207).

4 By “land,” Butala means natural areas or “prime agricultural land”—“genuine working ranches and farms”—certainly not acreages or “estates” owned by “well-off urban people” who want to escape from “urban noise and speed”; indeed, “only their money gives them the right to be there” (211–12).

5 Interestingly, though rural “isolation is very much an advantage” for a writer, Butala admitted that, “on cold winter nights when I can’t write and there’s nothing on TV, I’d give almost anything to be in a café in Toronto or somewhere surrounded by other writers” (cited in Roberts 1996:C1).
6 On page 198 of the novel, Selena reverts to using the name Diana, her “christened name, which they had abandoned long ago in childhood.” The narrator does likewise for the rest of the novel, but the significance of this switch is unclear; perhaps it is meant to draw greater attention to the name of the Roman goddess of woodlands, a patroness/protector of women, and a “huntress” (see 224). Here I will use the name Diane throughout for the sake of consistency. The other three main female characters in Luna also derive their names from Greek and Roman mythology: Rhea, a Titaness and mother figure; Selena, Greek goddess of the moon (the Roman goddess Luna); and Phoebe, also a Titaness.

7 Cf. the story “Breaking Horses,” collected in Queen of the Headaches (Butala 1985), in which Edna, unhappy with her life on a horse ranch, departs for Calgary, where one of her daughters lives, and perhaps on to Vancouver, where her daughter wants to move. Edna’s husband disapproves of their daughter’s lifestyle (as a model) in the city, but Edna would like to exclaim, “At least she isn’t stuck on some god-forsaken ranch somewhere” (54). Edna also entertains a fantasy of running away with the hired hand, a horsebreaker, and she “sees the ranch growing smaller and smaller behind her, sees the road widening, becoming blacktop, leading into a city, its skyscrapers rising mistily toward the morning sun” (58).

8 Cf. the story “Night Class,” also collected in Real Life (Butala 2003 [2002]), in which Christine, a professor in Saskatoon, agrees to teach a night class in the fall semester at a monastery a fair distance from the city but cannot help “picturing herself in the middle of the night stuck in a snowbank on a deserted country road” (13). And that, of course, is what happens. Christine has not driven in the country for some time and thus is “not used to driving on gravel” (16), and her small city car is no match for a country blizzard. She is rescued by the abbot, who is driving, appropriately, a one-ton truck, a vehicle more suitable for gravel roads and winter storms. Cf. also Wild Stone Heart (Butala 2000), in which Butala relates an episode in which she, on her way back home from the city, tried to get across a rain-soaked field to her house in her “city clothes,” which were clearly insufficient for the task of crossing the country (see 161). The implication is that, had she been in her country clothes, this would not have been such an ordeal.

9 The intention, clearly, is to emphasize the (stereotypical) big prairie sky, and it is a common tactic.

10 Let us switch perspectives for a moment: for urban people, at least those “for whom a gravel road is an adventure” (Herriot 2004:30), are not mixed farms “disgustingly smelly and dirty”; farming machines “unbearably noisy, ... laughably expensive,” and “vastly dangerous”; and farmers themselves “always in a panting hurry” during calving, seeding, and harvest (and perhaps on their way to coffee row on rainy days)?
11 See Harrison (2009) for a discussion of the OMB in the context of “Arcadians and Utopians in the Recent Novels of Sharon Butala.”

12 Melnyk wonders (see 108), after reading *The Perfection of the Morning*, whether people who live in the city, and even like living there, are somehow less human, or more morally culpable, than those who live in the country. In fact, in Butala’s work, it is farmers who receive much moral condemnation for what they have done to the native prairie. City people, like Jessie Sheridan, the “helpless, brainless city girl” in *The Fourth Archangel* (Butala 1992:93), are more pitied than condemned.

13 That may be, but nature is not always welcomed in the city, in which bears and moose are seen as “trespassers” (110), or not always perceived in the city, for Melnyk admits that urban people “feel a need for otherness” and “go out to ... Butala’s world” to satisfy it (112).

14 I am adapting here, of course, from the sheep in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BAD” (1984 [1945]:27).