THE CULTURE OF NATURE AND THE LOGIC OF MODERNITY: SHARON BUTALA'S *THE PERFECTION OF THE MORNING: AN APPRENTICESHIP IN NATURE*[1]

Smaro Kamboureli
University of Victoria

ABSTRACT

This essay analyses Sharon Butala's best-selling book *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (1994) in search for the key to its enormous success. It identifies the elements that constitute Butala's localism, and the ideological and contextual narratives that construct her sense of regionalism, as well as the implications of the image of Nature that emerges from the unwavering personalism and spirituality that characterize her vision. Through a deconstructive reading of her work, the essay intends to show the ways in which Butala's construction of nature and subjectivity point to an ambivalent, indeed troubling, relationship with the subject of modernity, an issue that demands attention given the recent critiques of modernity in the contexts of globalization, the environment, and local communities.

KEY WORDS: Butala, regionalism, localism, globalization, modernity, subjectivity, autobiography, Canadian writing.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el bestseller de Sharon Butala, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (1994), en busca de las claves de su tremendo éxito. Se identifican los elementos que constituyen el sentido de 'localismo' en Butala, y las narrativas ideológicas y contextuales que conforman su enfoque regionalista, así como el significado de la 'Naturaleza' que surge del personalismo y la espiritualidad de su visión. A través de una lectura deconstructiva de su trabajo, se intenta ilustrar el modo en que las construcciones de la naturaleza y la subjetividad en esta obra se apoyan en una relación ambivalente, incluso preocupante, con el sujeto de la Modernidad, tema que requiere especial atención, dadas las críticas más recientes de la modernidad en los contextos de la globalización, el medio ambiente y las comunidades locales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Butala, regionalismo, localismo, globalización, modernidad, subjetividad, autobiografía, escritura canadiense.

> All locality building has a moment of colonization, a moment both historical and chronotypic, where there is a formal recognition that the production of a neighborhood requires deliberate, risky, even violent action in respect to the soil, forests, animals, and other human beings.
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> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (183)

Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (1994), her sixth book, was a number one best-seller for over a year. Positively reviewed, it received the Saskatchewan Non-Fiction Award and the Spirit of Saskatchewan Award in 1994, as well being nominated for a Governor General's Award.[2] The release of her most recent title, *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields* (2000), the sequel to *The Perfection of the Morning*, has so far been received with similar enthusiasm. As recent discussions in the Canadian mass media attest, the popular success of a literary title often says more about the social and political climate of the culture in general, and cultural and literary institutions in particular, than about a title's inherent merits[3]. Still, irrespective of the publishers' marketing strategies and the media's commodification of literature, a critically acclaimed and popular title like *The Perfection of the Morning*, an intriguing, albeit puzzling, book, must surely communicate a message that strikes a chord in many readers. That on account of this book Butala has been heralded as "one of this country's true visionaries," "a wonderful guide," may hold, then, the answer to this title's popularity.[4]

If there is a single way of articulating what characterizes Butala's vision, it would be the passion and conviction with which she advocates a "return to Nature" (*The Perfection* 12). The book is marked by a strong sense of locality, so intense and circumscribed in its particularism that it seems to move beyond both the conditions that led to and the ideas characterizing the regionalism of the 1970s in Canada, especially that on the prairies, Butala's territory. Since that movement has ceased to be the determining force behind the recognition of western authors in the last fifteen years or so, the fact that her narrative is firmly located in one particular area, "the extreme southwest corner of Saskatchewan, just north of the Montana border" (IX), would suggest an instance of residual regionalism[5]. Perhaps, more accurately,

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[1] A version of this paper was presented as a plenary talk for The Association of Quebecois and Canadian Literatures, The Congress, University of Alberta, Edmonton, May 2000.

[2] See, for example, the dustjacket of *Wild Stone Heart.* Butala writes of the success of *The Perfection of the Morning*, as well as the impact it had on her, in the section "Diary of a Loser" in *Coyote's Morning Cry*, 102-11.

[3] See, for example, Kenneth Harvey's article, "Book Awards: Who Needs them?", *The Globe and Mail,* November, 4, 2000, R1.

[4] See *Books in Canada*, 23.3 (1994), 27.

[5] This point certainly demands further elaboration, but a discussion of Butala's text in the context of prairie regionalism and modernity would take me too far afield. For a recent treatment of regionalism in Canada, see the special issue, *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian*

The Perfection of the Morning, especially when considered alongside Butala's other titles, *The Garden of Eden* (1998) and *Wild Stone Heart* (2000), could be read as an indictment of some of the dangers of globalism. If "[b]eing local in a globalized world," as Zygmunt Bauman says, "is a sign of social deprivation and degradation" (2), if "[n]eo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies... reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalization" (3), then the return to localism we are witnessing today demands that we view it as much in relation to its earlier regionalist manifestations as in the context of old and contemporary discourses about the self-identity of communities, place, and global economies. Though it would be too far-fetched to see Butala as being "on the receiving end of globalization" in Zygmunt's sense of the phrase, her narrative is certainly imbued with a degree of "fundamentalism" both in terms of the vision she promotes and the fashion in which she does so.

What constitutes Butala's localism? What contextual and ideological narratives is her construction of the region she discovers linked with? What are the implications of the imaginary of Nature that emerges from the unwavering personalism and spirituality that characterize her vision? In other words, what are the directions toward which she "guides" her many readers? These are the questions that frame my argument here.

A PICARESQUE OF IDEOLOGICAL ADVENTURES

The Perfection of the Morning is offered at once as an "intensely personal spiritual journey" (xvi) and an "archetypal" (23) experience Butala believes we all have the potential to recognize, if not learn from. "Slowly, through my joy in the beauty of this landscape," she writes, "I began to learn new things, to see my life differently. I began to realize how life for all of us in the West is informed and shaped by Nature in ways we don't even realize, much less notice consciously. Eventually, all that I was learning led to this book" (xv; emphasis added). Butala's journey may offer a record of her own experiences, but her narrative, framed as it is by the interplay and tensions between social structures in "the West" and the structures of the psyche, should be seen as an invitation to approach this text in the larger context of the construction of knowledges. Her reluctance to call *The Perfection of the Morning* autobiography —"I did not want to write autobiography and for a long time avoided it as much as I could" (xvi)— is instructive. In fact, though she "gradually recognized that it would have to become autobiography" (xvi), by the end of the next paragraph she remains uncertain as to what her narrative is: "In

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and American Writing, eds, Christian Riegel, Herb Wyile, Karen Overbye and Don Perkins (Edmonton: U. of Alberta, 1997), also available as a special issue in *Textual Studies in Canada*.

writing what the world will call autobiography, I am torn between the facts and history and the truth of the imagination, and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean" (xvii). Butala's hesitation anticipates the critical impulse Helen Buss exemplifies in her review of the book.

Buss's reading of Butala's hesitancy to call her narrative autobiography as "the usual shyness in admitting to the autobiographical that women writers of her generation display" (171) misses the mark. Though *The Perfection of the Morning* could be read, according to Buss, as "an amazing experimentation in autobiographical forms that women have undertaken in the last few decades" (170), a "spiritual/personal memoir" (171), this approach elides the ways in which the narrative emerges in opposition to but also through some of the discourses of modernity. More specifically, what get elided through Buss's reading are the ways Butala's construction of nature and subjectivity point to an ambivalent, indeed troubling, relationship with the subject of modernity, an issue that demands attention given the recent critiques of modernity in the contexts of globalization, the environment, and local communities. *The Perfection of the Morning* is an autobiography, but one whose generic drive relies heavily on the ideologies of both the *kunstlerroman* and the *bildungsroman*, for it is a narrative as much about the making of an artist whose vision and aesthetics are locally rooted as it is about the development of the "right[] approach" to "acknowledge the power" of nature (142), a "power," however, that appropriates the materiality of the local in order to transcend it.

If Butala is indeed a "true visionary," the kind expected to "guide" her readers into some forgotten, endangered, or previously uncharted territories, then we have to read *The Perfection of the Morning* not only as the autobiography of "a woman in nature," a presumably "careful historicization of her spiritual adventures" (Buss 172), but also as a text driven by the logic, as well as the genealogy, of the vision it articulates. Contrary to Butala's authorial intentions, the text's own intentionality, as I hope to show, announces an uneasy alliance between nature and subjecthood. "I begin to think like the Bushmen," Butala writes in the conclusion of her Preface, "that in the beginning a dream was dreaming us" (xvii). If Butala's vision is given to her by a dream "dreaming" her, if her specular recognition of this "dream" is simultaneously the result of her interpellation by indigenous consciousness and her own voluntarism, and if it is the adoption of indigenous consciousness that holds, at least in part, the promise of "a renewed relationship with Nature" (206), then we ought to examine what the ideological ramifications of her call for relocalization are at this point.

Butala posits herself as the agent of "primal" (127) knowledge that is inextricably related to the "timelessness" (71) of nature, an "elemental knowledge" that has been menaced, indeed eroded, by the "confus[ion]" that comes from "urban life" (72). Were "elemental knowledge," whatever it may be, only the concern of a single individual, its claims to primacy and eternal truth would be instantly belied. This alone would suggest that *The Perfection* does not want to be read as a single individual's life story. When the author keeps reiterating that "[t]he Great Plains are a land for visionaries, they induce visions, they are themselves visions... What other landscape around the world produces the mystic psyche so powerfully?" (101), the

reader cannot but confront the intentionality inscribed in these statements —never mind the paradox, as we shall see, that this intentionality relies on rationalization while attempting to supersede reason. Rather than celebrate her book as "brave" (Buss 173), it would be more pertinent to wonder aloud whether the terms in which Butala's project intends to curtail, if not transform, the emerging world order of globalism are at all feasible, or just a mere re-dressing of "the local/global figure," which, as Paul Bové, among others, has argued, "is in some ways a figure of neocolonial struggle" (385).

Because, as Horkheimer says, "[t]he direct or naive contact with any supposed eternal entities or principles, whether they belong to a pagan [the case, in some respects, with Butala] or an orthodox philosophy, has been disrupted by technological development..., [t]here is no intellectual way back" (365). This may account for the anti-intellectualism that marks Butala's text, a point I will return to below, but also begs the question as to what master narratives she seeks to unravel by relocating from the city to a rural area.[6] That this movement is validated by the appearance of supernatural signs, by her promulgation of conceptual and mystical distinctions she offers as alternatives to what troubles urban subjectivities today, would imply that her project is intent, at least in part, on reversing the course of modernity. For, as David Scott writes, the story of "the self-consciousness of the modern" speaks of "the sovereignty of desacralized reason... the story of the decline of religion and of the efficacy of the supernatural... in the face of the progress of scientific reason" (65-6). In this case, the "bravery" of Butala's project would seem to reside, against all odds, in her desire to retrieve an apocalyptic mythology of self and nature. However, at the same time that Butala's narrative is an indictment of "the linear progression of rationalization" (Scott 66), it also employs the same objectification and reification methods that modernity's secularization project entails. The progress that her "dream" promises is not tantamount to creating an alternative course of human development. Instead, though she decidedly follows an itinerary which reverses modernity's progress by taking her back to a "primal" state of being, recurring statements like "'This land makes Crees of us all... (100)' demonstrate Butala's intention to extract from them a universal natural law which at once annuls the Crees' cultural specificity and discloses the complicity of her project

[6] Lest I be misunderstood here, I am not using anti-intellectualism in the simple sense that Butala abandons or is against ideas. As she writes, not only "for a time books seemed to 'jump off the shelf' at me" (136), but "in outer silence, a whole new intellectual life was blooming inside me" (80). What I am referring to, instead, is Butala's penchant for privileging only a certain kind of received knowledge, a knowledge which, if not originating in her "solar plexus" (e.g. 125, 136), is revealed to her by Nature, and invariably mediated by her body, a body, though, whose materiality is usually suspended: "From there [her chest] the knowledge leaped to my brain and then was confirmed by my eyes" (138). This is but one example of how, instead of deconstructing the binary paradigms of the culture she critiques,she simply reverses the hierarchies inscribed in them, so that it is the body, rather than the mind, that is valorized here.

with modernity, and colonialism as its civilizing mission.[7] Rather than an "experimentation" in life writing, I am inclined to see *The Perfection* as a picaresque narrative of psychic and ideological adventures in which the return to the land may well hold the promise of redemption for the author. The emancipation it promises to the community of readers her narrative addresses, however, is another matter altogether.

BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE: A BILDUNG WITH A DIFFERENCE

The Perfection is resolutely marked by a teleology that speaks as much about "the truth" (217) of the lessons the author learns from the land as of the lessons the reader is to glean from Butala. Not only are we expected to read the book's subtitle, *An Apprenticeship in Nature*, literally, but Butala's narrative leaves no doubt as to her principal intention to "build[] a relationship with Nature" (XVI). It is this relationship that allows her to develop, through "the one, true landscape" (XIV) she happens upon in Saskatchewan, a deeper sense of her identity, but also "a sense of the presence of Nature as a living entity all around me" (9). At once mystical and self-determined, Butala's dialogue with the land is at the core of her narrative, but it is her body that is the conduit between her and nature. Be it through "out-of-body experience" (137) or through a different "range of somatic perception[s]" (136), her body acts as universal translator of what Nature, experienced as "feminine" (191), communicates to her. As she writes, "I felt... that some force was teaching me, that I should be still and quiet and listen, be alert for any instruction" (127). And she always "respond[s] to this call" not through "[her] brain but [her] gut" (125). Though the relationship of her body to Nature is one of the important elements in this narrative, what I intend to focus on here is not so much the means through which she learns, but rather the "instruction" she receives. Because the rhetoric, tone, and formal elements of the narrative make it abundantly clear that she has an urgent message to communicate to "us" all, I wish to explore some of the ways in which *The Perfection* is akin to the tradition of *Bildung*, but a *Bildung* that is critically different from that which has emerged from the Enlightenment and shaped modernity.

Whereas Butala's experience of maturation reflects the history of the cultivation of character in the West in that it follows a movement away from what Kant

[7] Here Butala quotes herself: I thought, then said, 'This land makes Crees of us all'. By this, I meant that it appeared to me that the Crees, for example developed the culture they developed because it was the best fit between themselves and the land. And it was the *land* that taught them that. They adapted to the land, and not the other way around, as we Europeans so stupidly did, trying to force this arid western land to be, as government propaganda had for seventy-five years and more put it, 'the breadbasket of the worls' (100).

called "*self-incurred immaturity*," namely "the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (58), what frames her maturation process is a direct reversal of Enlightenment values. For the "other" that guides her into maturation, that releases her from her "sense of being alien" (69), is nature. The Enlightenment's project of *Bildung* involves a development of moral character "based on the rational mastery and use of nature" (Vierhaus 334); freedom from prejudice and "the chaos of nature" (Readings 63) were its ultimate goals. Butala's *Bildung*, however, constructs a subject mobilized by its resistance to culture, a subject whose imagination and perception become indistinguishable as it attempts to rid itself from the contingencies of the external world and meld, instead, with what she takes to be the natural order of things. In Butala's case, individual consciousness manifests itself through the desire to re-naturalize nature by, on one hand, delivering it from its cultural representations and, on the other, internalizing nature's own spirit and mysteries. Since the development of this subjectivity, as I hope to show, depends on selectively and intentionally translating the empirical into the "numinous" (Butala, *The Perfection* 63), a symbolic order Butala structures through myths she borrows from various traditions, it attempts to withdraw from the noetic world of reason and aspire to discover an imaginary of nature that can identify itself as pure and immanent while also revealing itself to have textual intelligibility.

Here is one example of how Butala relates this process:

> I came a stranger to this magnificent but in some ways terrible place to live, with its more tragic than triumphant history, and gradually, although never easily, I found both a way to feel at home in my skin, and in this place.
> Through that struggle to fit —to become congruent— I became not the painter I once was but a writer, and I discovered that the writer I've become is the Self I've been in search of for so many years. But at the same time it has been the act of writing that created and continues to create that Self I've at last found, and that acts as the instrument of integration between myself and my environment, chiefly my home in the landscape. The last seventeen years here have been a long, intensely personal spiritual journey, one that has been inextricably intertwined with my reaquaintance with the land and the effects of this renewed relationship with Nature on my own woman's soul. (xvi)

Nature is to be understood not only as a place with a particular history, but as a scene of instruction from which Butala emerges an enlightened person. Her capitalization of Nature and Self, in the passage cited above as well as throughout the text, can only indicate that behind the particularity of personal truths there lies an essential reality.[8] Inscribed in the narrative as a sovereign figure, Nature stands for a higher understanding of the essence of things. It becomes an analogue of

[8] Whenever I refer to Nature in upper case, I refer to Butala's concept of it.

superior truth, but one inaccessible to those who fail to commune with nature *as* Nature.

Clearly, Butala's apprenticeship is relational to Nature, and this alone testifies to the disjunction between her *Bildung* and that of modernity's. Tutored in and by Nature, Butala develops an identity that forms together with it an organic pair; as she never tires telling us, they alone can apprehend the totality of living knowledge. In keeping with the *Bildung* tradition, Butala's project is certainly emancipatory, but the freedom she experiences is the kind that comes from being "freed into the elements" (XIV) of Nature, in effect from being released from the constraints of culture. Her *Bildung* is, then, a project of restoration. Through her apprenticeship, she learns how to translate her original "awe of Nature" into a body of knowledge that restores to it its independent existence. This is accomplished through an appreciation of natural beauty, but also by her probing and investing in "strange things" (63) such as dreams and mysterious encounters with coyotes and eagles, thus constructing an economy of the spiritual, a project she continues to pursue in *Wild Heart Stone* and *Coyote's Morning Cry*.

Relating her upbringing as a person born into a farming family but brought up in a city, she writes:

> I had stopped thinking of Nature as people raised in it do and began to think of it as urban people do: as a place to holiday —the mountains, the seaside, a quiet lake somewhere in the country— as a place to acquire a suntan, have a summer romance, paint a picture of, enjoy a change of atmosphere. For a long period in my late teens and early twenties, I actively avoided picnics, complaining bitterly that they were stupid since there were always dirt and bugs and leaves in your food and insects to bite you, and although they were supposed to be a holiday, picnics were more work for us women than cooking a meal in the kitchen would be. (9-10)

Before Butala begins to have her series of epiphanic encounters with Nature, nature for her was, to borrow Horkheimer's words, "dead matter —a heap of things," something that had "lost every vestige of vital independent existence, all value of its own" (361). Her apprenticeship, however, changes all that: nature becomes Nature, while the jaded urban woman acquires a Self. Her *Bildung's* objective, then, is none other than to instruct us that the obsession in our times with the cultural imaginary is misbegotten, for it is guided by its own self-legitimating logic. At first sight this approach would seem to have the potential to contribute to contemporary critiques of, for example, minority identities and transnationalism, but Butala's message does not do away with the old binaries and the values attached to them.

The Perfection of the Morning follows the traditional *Bildung*'s method to "teach[] knowledge acquisition as a *process* rather than the acquisition of knowledge as a product" (Readings 67), but the Self fashioned through this apprenticeship learns to enjoy an autonomy that is different from that sought by the sovereign subject imagined by Enlightenment. While in the Enlightenment tradition maturity, together with its consequent autonomy, is to be accomplished in conjunction with a network of social and political forces, what facilitates Butala's own development is precisely the opposite. She turns her back on urban life and pays only lip

service to social conditions and contingencies, and it is in effect this retreat from culture and the complexity of the socius that allows her to delve as deeply as she says she does into the mysteries of Nature.[9] Butala may reverse some of the principal elements of the *Bildung*'s paradigm, but both her apprenticeship and the truths she claims she discovers in that process still reside within the binarist thinking of the Enlightenment tradition.

So, what exactly constitutes what so many reviewers see as the radicalness of her vision? Since the author is no longer "the neophyte" when she writes The Perfection but has become "the expert" (99), she places the readers themselves in the position of apprentices. The necessary condition, then, for reading such a text would be to understand not only what constitutes Butala's pedagogical project but also what it expects from its readership. Pedagogy, as Robert Con Davis says, is not "a transcendental practice for the appropriation and dissemination of 'truth' existing outside of history," nor is it "a fixed entity"; pedagogy, instead, is "a social practice and a cultural construct, a dynamic and unfinished... activity —an enactment-as-practice of ideology in culture" (Con Davies 264). Given the archetypalism prevailing in this text, and that the landscape that "induce[s] visions," as Butala says, "exists at the edge of metaphysics" (101), it is important to examine whether her pedagogical project is as free of the foundational narratives of modem society as she wants it to be.[10]

Despite the fervor with which Butala documents her return to Nature, not surprisingly, she never quite leaves culture behind. Buss sees this as evidence that Butala "deconstructs the binaries by entering into a multitude of female experiences at once." But the examples she cites as proof that Butala actualizes this "without reductionism" —"the self that feels itself living inside the experience of the wild things, (*sic*) is also able to shout down a coyote's tricks by telling him to 'get a job!' The self that keeps a journal of her dream-inspired spiritual life also keeps records of the daily life of people making a living"(Buss 173)— reflect, instead, a simplistic valorization of experience that speaks of Butala's bewildering ambivalence about culture. I say "bewildering," for Butala's admission that she "carefully hold[s] the two worlds apart" (169) undermines the gist of her book. The polarities that inform Butala's account of her retreat from culture suggest that the meanings and values she discovers in Nature can signify only in relation to the urban and cultured life she juxtaposes them to.[11]

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[9] Some readers may argue that I am wilfully misreading her narrative, for, after all, she does talk about class and other related issues. What I have in mind here, though, is how she approaches these issues. See, for example, 35.

[10] See, for example, her references to Jung on 176, but also 64, 79, 80, 104, 139 and 172-3 for other references she makes to works belonging to similar traditions.

[11] The fact that it is her return to Nature that turns her into a writer further complicates matters, but I do not have the space to pursue this here. Butala takes on this issue at some length in *Coyote Morning's Cry*.

When "[i]n 1976" Butala, "thirty-six years old" at the time, first visited the ranch of the man about to become her second husband (IX), she found herself in "a high plateau" (X), in an area "in the extreme southwest corner of Saskatchewan, just north of the Montana border" (IX). The existence of the landscape, "a place that covers 28,000 square kilometers... five times the size of Prince Edward Island" (IX), stunned her. It was not the size alone that took her by surprise but the fact that her education, as well as her life in Saskatchewan, had failed to make her aware of it: she "hadn't studied it in school, since no early explorer had crossed it," nor had she seen it in her "car trips across the country... since no major highways went through its heart" (IX). Confronted with its "extraordinary" (IX) beauty —"low rolling hills and flat or sloping grassy areas cut here and there by coulees, chasms of varying sizes eroded by rain and meltwater," with few "shrubs" or some "coniferous" trees growing, with "dens for bobcats and coyote families and high places for golden eagles to anchor their large, reusable nests" (X)— Butala realized that the other places in Canada where she had lived "were all merely mistakes of Nature... [She] had at last found the one true landscape" (XIV), a place where "the presence of Nature as a living entity [was] all around" her (9).

The singularity she attributes to this landscape illustrates the intense localism informing her narrative[12]. It also shows that her ardent response to it privileges it to the point that it ceases to be a particular place and becomes a universal entity, a sign whose signifier and signified collapse into each other. What is important to consider here is the social conditions and circumstances which contribute to what is, undoubtedly, a monumental decision in her life, to relocate in that landscape permanently.

Evidently, it is not naive romanticism about nature that inspires her decision. Despite the fact that she shared her family's "confused nostalgia" (12) for "the farm as a mythic paradise from which [they] had been expelled, by drought and bankers, and (*sic*) could never return" (6), as an urban woman she "developed contempt for those who wanted to return to Nature". Those urbanites "were all romantic dreamers, nitwits..., people... who didn't know about Nature's nasty side." "[N]ot averse to sunsets or moonlight on water," she was "just as happy to look at pictures of them... with [her] feet on a thick rug and a well-insulated wall between [her] and the thing itself' (12). Beyond the overwhelming power that ranchland exerts on

[12] Interestingly, though, even in the context of this specific terrain, Butala's experiences revolve around a "particular field" (107); in fact, this field, together with the mysteries and histories surrounding it, is the primary/primal landscape she focuses on in *Wild Stone Heart*. In many respects, then, the essential truth of Nature is located in one particular geographical location, at once a universalist and exceptionalist view. This is also evident in Butala's comment I cited earlier, namely, that the places where she lived before arriving in this location "were all merely mistakes of Nature".

her, clearly the principal reason behind the transformation of her relationship with nature as a "thing" into an atavistic one lies in the terms in which she disavows urban life.

Of the "several identities: divorcée, single parent, career woman, graduate student, future academic" (29) that she had to straddle as a city woman, it was her academic role that appears to have had a catalytic impact on her decision to leave the city. She had "had enough of [her] windowless office at the university and the endless maneuvering for advantage, not to mention the incredibly hard work people of [her] lowly rank had to do for distressingly low pay" (17). Many academics, be they regular or sessional faculty or teaching assistants, would certainly empathize with the frustrations she outlines. But the tirades against the academy that so frequently punctuate her text, and the irony behind her speculation that, though they didn't voice their reservations, "both [her] friends and [her] family thought [she] was making a terrible mistake," suggest that we should look for the influence on her decision to relocate beyond the exploitative working conditions and the pressures of a demanding job. "Such is the prestige of a university job," she states, "the sense of those who make a life there as being the annointed (*sic*), that my fellow graduate students and lecturers must have found my abdication from it very hard to understand" (1). This elitist image that she draws is, of course, a familiar if not clichéd response to universities as ivory towers: sites of logocentric pedagogy, agents of repressive state apparatuses.

Nevertheless, writing as she is at the same time that universities in general and the humanities in particular have come under attack, Butala overlooks the sociopolitical order of institutions of learning as well as the tensions and contradictions at the core of debates on education today. The mixed metaphor she ironically employs to construct the university teacher at once as a sacred and sovereign figure serves as a reproach of the hegemonic role of intellectuals, but is not coincident with the recent attempts to deconstruct the university as an institution of humanist reason. "[T]he traditional university" operates, as William V. Spanos writes, "in the name of culture but in behalf of sociopolitical colonization, [and... inscribe[s] the relay of 'mature' identities —psychological, sexual, cultural, social, political, and international— in the student body" (199). Implicit in this humanist pedagogy is the double construction of the intellectual as both "an empowered elite" and as "a vestigial organ of modernity" (Michael 1). Butala appears to dismiss the traditional university because she sees it as a living museum, at once a reserve of knowledge and a laboratory where objective truths are produced, but she seems oblivious that this is the same pedagogical imaginary that posthumanists like Spanos are intent on deconstructing.

In *The Perfection* the university is inscribed as a totalized construct, a site where the goals and approaches of various disciplines and the differences between scientists and humanists are subsumed into a homogeneous whole with a singular intent, to privilege a certain kind of reason. Not only does this image of academe bear no fissures whatsoever as a result of the critical pedagogy that has already entered institutional structures, albeit in a restricted fashion, but it is also constructed in the image of Butala's own self-fulfilled fantasy of what academic culture is guilty

of. It is not my intention here to belittle the distressing experience she obviously had at university when she studied art and English. But if her narrative's *Bildung* is to have any efficacy, the reader must look for the ways in which it exceeds her individual history. As I am trying to demonstrate here, Butala's rejection of urban and academic life, a metonymy of modernity in this text, says as much about the disparities in her life as about her complicity with some of the ideological values of the cultural tradition she denounces. Hence the need to exercise caution in approaching her vision.

A long citation from her text is in order here:

> In that particular stony field I learned much that I had not dreamt of before it began to teach me; I had experiences there that changed my life.... I was discovering something about living in Nature that I had never heard anyone speak of, or read in any books, thought it might have been in some of them if I'd had the eyes to read it there.
> [...]
> I have said, "This is the place where words stop," referring to that moment when, out in Nature... we realize that an entity is present, or that Nature is alive, even that Nature has a memory. I meant by this that suddenly there seem to be no words to describe adequately our experiences... no single nouns or verbs which have been given over to the sole purpose of describing such awareness.
> I think we have so allowed the scientific approach to the world to take over our perceptions that we are afraid to mention such experiences for fear of being laughed at or vilified. When we do, we find ourselves stammering, struggling for words... We struggle against skepticism, our own as much as anyone else's, and in time we lapse into silence about them and a whole, valuable dimension of human experience remains unsung and unvalidated.
> It is hard not to be very angry with scientists for this loss. Their unshakable belief in a materialistic, purely objective world has so permeated our culture that only in religious life are we allowed the slightest latitude in the dimensions of what we might call the "real." Scientists have specialized in narrowing experience, told us that the only truths possible are the ones they know; they have developed specialized languages the rest of us don't understand and have elevated themselves, and been elevated by us, to the status of those who know, while poets, visionaries and mystics have been relegated to the realm of the crazy. (63-5)

Notwithstanding the problematic inclusiveness of the "we," this passage exemplifies the Manichean logic that permeates Butala's discourse, as well as the contradictions which initially impede her intention to "become congruent." "While it is her encounter with Nature that renders her speechless, she attributes her loss for words to the inadequacy of the educational system, a failure that encompasses cultural conditioning in general and the absence of relevant books in particular. Her assumption that she must already have a language to talk about her new experiences in Nature, indeed the underlying belief here that such a language exists but has been suppressed by academic discourse, illustrates that she takes a fundamental clarity in communication to be a given. The frustration she articulates in the passage above clearly relies on her premise that language is a passive and transparent

instrument. Her charges against academic discourse, then, disclose her faith in a common language, as well as her conviction that there is a single horizon of truth which has, however, been hidden away either by scientific obfuscations or just plain ideological prejudice toward it. Putting aside the naiveté that characterizes her attack on scientists and the feeble attempt at taking on Plato, the failure in representation that she experiences is, to put it crudely, nobody's fault. There is no immanent reality to be revealed for the kind of representation she seeks to be possible. Nor is there a continuum of knowledge or history that a single discourse could adequately express. Thus her "stammering" is a symptom that can be easily diagnosed: it is caused by her longing to retrieve the lost ideal of a "congruent" self, a desire to capture and articulate the imaginary of Nature, whose intelligibility she believes to be universal.

She may blame the university culture, "those who *know*," for that loss, but her complaint has nothing in common with those launched against the institutionalization and commodification of knowledge[13]; rather, her interest lies in replacing what has already been identified as the hegemony of university culture with a new hegemony, that of Nature. Thus the pedagogical alternative she advances is not ideologically different from the one she rejects. She may have found a cure in Nature for the malaise she experienced in the academe and urban life, but Nature's promise of redemption is structurally and ideologically indebted to some of the same values of Enlightenment's emancipatory project.

Nor does her dismissal of learning institutions coincide with the other pole of institutional debates, that dubbed the "culture wars," namely, the contention that universities are no longer the stronghold of Western cultural values, and thus pose a threat to the tradition of reason. If anything, though she critiques "Europeans," in the totalized vision of the world to which Butala's spiritual path leads race and ethnicity are jettisoned, for the value of the Self we are supposed to aspire to rises above those critical differences; only the particularity of indigenous consciousness hovers there as a guiding presence. No longer "noble savages," the Natives on the Great Plains, as well as indigenous peoples from the Kalahari Desert to New Zealand, nevertheless emerge as peoples who, precisely because they "have non-technological cultures and live in and by Nature," know better than anyone "what Nature... has to teach us about how to live" (105). Butala admits the limits of her knowledge, and is "well aware" of the danger of being accused of "cultural appropriation" (128), yet her intention here is unambiguous.[14] She posits Native people,

[13] In addition to the works cited in the essay, see, for example, Robbins (*Intellectuals)* and Robbins *(Secular),* Scholes, Gless and Herrstein Smith, Boggs, Nelson, Bérubé, and Bérubé and Nelson.

[14] What she writes on this issue not only conveys a reductive view of cultural appropriation and the legacy of colonialism, but also reflects her tendency to collapse critical differences into universal categories: "I am well aware of the discussions about cultural appropriation and about the gap

subjects she conceives as being inherently attuned to Nature, and whom she glorifies precisely because of the non-technological capacity she attributes to them, as the embodiment of the exemplary, and therefore uncontaminated, Self[15]. In this project, then, indigenous subjects are "those who know" the right way, while Nature is the university par excellence.

NATURE AS MEMORY

There is more than symmetry between Butala's retreat from culture and her construction of Nature's imaginary. In contrast to the logic of modernity that guarantees the future by forestalling a return to the past, Butala's project is driven by the opposite desire to retrieve the past. Since this past is synonymous with "timelessness," it is a past that has never quite vanished. Pushed under consciousness, repressed by culture, all it needs in order to come forth is, apparently, someone with Butala's "primal sense of womanhood... and [] and unconscious tribal memory" (54), someone who "didn't have to think at all with [her] mind" (53). In this context, Nature is both the site where the past is buried and what memory reveals, a living archive.

Despite her initial bewilderment and resistance after she relocates, Butala's return to, and immersion in, Nature is the result of finding herself utterly interpellated by the landscape she inhabits.[16] Here is one scene that is paradigmatic of the way she seems to be hailed by Nature in a literal fashion:

between cultures and between the immediate experience of centuries of oppression and suffering endured by Native peoples of which I have no personal experience. (Although it is worth pointing out that the French side of my family has still not forgotten the expulsion of the Acadians in the 1750s by the English, when they were among the dispersed). I do not want to trespass: I do not want to make claims about or on things I have no right to and don't understand because my history is a different one from that of the Natives on the Great Plains. In fact, although I do believe in spirits and in local gods, I avoid theology, even in feminism. Rather than reconstructing or copying Native beliefs, these understandings of the spirit world, it seems to me, come with Nature, come out of Nature itself; come with the land and are taught by it" (128). What would be appropriation in a social context is here absolved by Butala's construction and definition of Nature.

[15] It is important to mention here that, in this text, it is usually an essentialized, abstracted notion of indigenous subjectivity that Butala sees as embodying the spirit of Nature. It is this complete identification of the indigenous with the natural that prompts Butala to argue that "[i]t seems to me so clear as to be self-evident that living directly on the earth as Native people did, with constant, direct contact with the natural world, in tepees instead of on floors lifted off the earth by cement basements, would make different people of any of us" (134). Though she often speaks of indigenous subjects as historical or contemporary people, the terms in which she discusses them are fraught with probems (e.g. 111-123). Similar problems also arise in her loose use of "Europeans" as a term that refers to colonialists and pioneers, no matter what their origins, but also as a term that is often employed as a synonym of all Canadians (e.g., 113)

[16] This immersion does not include any direct engagement or immediate identification with the local community of farmers and ranchers. Though her attitude toward them changes a little

> I had been driven out of the house by a jitteriness, an unnamed and inexplicable unease that prevented me from working or even from sitting still. As I wandered, instead of fading as was usually the case, the uncomfortable sense of need —but for what?— grew stronger. It seemed to me that I was out there for a purpose, that there was a place I was supposed to be, or that something was going to happen. I had no idea where or why or what, but the sensation was too strong to be ignored, or I had learned enough by then to know ignoring it as we have all been trained to do would be a kind of willful madness. (124-5)

The "unease" Butala feels, always the preamble to some mystical revelation, is not to be confused with the reservations she has as she goes about communing with Nature. Rather, it belongs to the metonymic syntax that comprises the narrative. Butala's "dreams" and "prophetic visions," be they part of her daily reality or the different dimension of perception she gradually becomes attuned to, are contiguously related in that they are all integral elements of the same symbolic order, that of Nature as an alienated entity but one that remains marked by the ability to make subjects like Butala accede to its message. Not unlike the typical Althusserian subject, Butala confounds what she happens upon in that landscape with collective memory. At once a prelapsarian, paradisal ground and "a landscape in which history, unrecorded and unremembered as it is, had transmuted itself into an always present spiritual dimension" (129), Nature is both memory and a monument to memory. But, because for Butala Nature is also what mediates memory, what makes her body remember, Nature-as-memory lacks the "inscription" and "exteriorization" that characterize remembering (Kamuf 58). Though this may serve as proof of Butala's construction of Nature as an eternal entity, it does little, if anything at all, to account for the materiality and discursiveness of the human body and what she calls "the geography of the wilderness" (49). Since Butala "remember[s] with [her] body" but also "with another sense for which we have no name but is (*sic*) no less real for that" (9), memory in *The Perfection* is free of the distortion that normally characterizes it. It preserves without perverting.

Perhaps this is the reason Butala is convinced that her response to Nature's hailing leads her to a world and a condition of being that are free of ideology. But, as Slavoj Zizek says, only when the Althusserian subject can say "'I am in ideology... can she "truly avoid the vicious circle of ideology" (41). Though she unequivocally states that Nature "is affecting us without our being aware of it" (100), Nature in Butala's narrative is consciously cast as the single legitimate authority on Truth, an obscured yet still legible superior power, an impersonal law. Nature as the transcendent other of the Panopticon, a field of continuous surveillance. Ironically, Butala remains oblivious to the fact that this kind of Nature does not provide any

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over the years, she finds she does not have much in common with them, an issue she discusses at some length throught the book.

answers to the questions raised by her polemics against urbanism and the dysfunctional logic of modernity, and that it is itself a social formation constructed by the master narratives determining the production of knowledge.

ROMANCING THE LOCAL: WALKING AND THE ASSIMILATION OF DETAIL

Though Butala lets herself be subjectivated by Nature's call, her text is punctuated by moments of apprehension. She is aware that she resorts to "clichés" (18), that her account dangerously flirts with dubious kinds of mysticism, that she may be accused of divorcing herself from the reality of the place she spiritualizes, and so she is anxious to explain herself (e.g., 169). Buss for one is persuaded by Butala's disclaimers, for she argues that Butala's project avoids all possible "traps awaiting such an endeavour," including "the trap of romanticizing the landscape" and of not "historiciz[ing] ... spiritual adventures" (Buss 172). So, how does Butala register the particularity of that landscape? How does she historicize her spiritual adventures? The answer to these questions lies, in part, in the ways she assimilates" (26) local detail.[17] Upon relocating, Butala becomes an avid walker, and it is through walking that she "gr[ows] familiar with the landscape and the small landmarks on it" (61). Indeed, walking becomes one of the main tropes in the text as it mediates both her desire to pay tribute to the "power [she] found out there" (142) and the ethos, if not ethic, of the kind of individualism permeating the narrative.

> I began to try to stop thinking about anything else but the dirt on the road, the grass beside it, the stones, the fields spreading out on each side, the hawks circling overhead, the song of the meadowlark or red-winged blackbird, the sound of the wind in the grass, a particular rock high on a hillside. This required concentration, I found, and a constant calling myself back from thoughts of other things to my surroundings at the moment. (142-3)

As a result of this concentration and careful observation, Butala constructs an astounding archive of local detail. It is her treatment of this detail that holds the key to the troubling kind of localism she advocates, for the local knowledge documented in *The Perfection* is instantly assimilated by Butala's intentions.

Detail in *The Perfection* offers a faithful record of the phenomenal world in the midst of which she lives. However, it soon becomes obvious, at least to this reader, that the accumulation and assimilation of detail is not meant so much to

[17] "Assimilate" is one of the most frequently used words in *The Perfection*, and thus, indicative of Butala's method of observation and perception. See, for example its occurrences on 43, 48, 50 and 69.

engage with that landscape in its own terms, but rather to facilitate Butala's release from the immediacy of that locality, to open the road, as it were, toward the grand abstractions of Nature and Self. Buss takes Butala's fascination with detail to be gender-specific, and thus celebrates it as part of this autobiography's female signature (172, 173). But taking this kind of detail at face value, as Buss does, overlooks what Naomi Schor calls "[t]he unchallenged association of woman and the particular" (17), namely the "alignment of woman and (devalorized) nature" (16). In *The Perfection* the "gendering of detail" is akin to the sublime's "anti-detailism" (Schor 17), yet another instance of the way Butala's project of relocalization both works with and against Enlightenment values. Far from subverting the ideology of the feminization of detail, Butala's detailism soon becomes complicit with yet another ideological tradition. While, as Alan Liu argues, "[d]etail is the very instrument of the antifoundational and anti-epistemological imperative in... cultural criticism" (81), and the genealogy of detail, as Schor has shown, leads up to modernist aesthetics and, by implication, to such movements as particularism, regionalism and historicism, Butala's detailism begs to differ. Though constantly drawn to a profusion of detail, lured as she is by her vision of a totalizing and totalized Nature, Butala invariably succumbs to her impulse to translate physical detail into elemental otherness. Thus her reliance, in Schor's words, on the "pervasive valorization of the minute, the partial, and the marginal" (3), what Liu calls the "romanticism of detail" (91), is, like walking, yet another important trope in this text. If "[i]n the picture of great detail, ...the local threatens to go transcendental" (Liu 91), in Butala's text the local never stands a chance as local, for under her assimilating eyes it is instantly transferred to an elsewhereness[18]. It is precisely this translation of the particular into the universal that is problematic about Butala's localism.

Butala formalizes walking, and gradually turns the overflow of detail into what Liu calls "a great picture of detail" (81), thus showing the *Bildung* of her entire project to be yet another master narrative, as pernicious as those she sets out to challenge. For Butala is not just hailed by Nature; she is also interpellated, this time unbeknownst to her, by the hegemonic ideology of the culture of modernity, one that has already been deconstructed, at least in theory, yet another instance of the ideological adventurism that mars her text.

If her initial fascination with that landscape is due, in part, to the fact that it has escaped the attention of early explorers, now Butala takes on the persona and role of an explorer and ethnographer. This is apparent in her desire to verify her insights and "strange happenings" through anthropological, historical and ethnographic studies, but also in how her walking becomes "an exercise in information gathering" (98). "I carried a notebook everywhere," she writes: "Chasing cows home

[18] One of the forms in which this detailism is transferred elsewhere is, for example, the recycling of details about this locality from *The Perfection* in *The Garden of Eden* or, vice versa, from *Luna*, an earlier novel in *The Perfection*.

on bitter winter days, I'd stop the truck, get out, draw a little diagram of the way an animal had pushed away the snow from a sage bush, write a description of the bush and the snow and droppings the animal had left, the colors, the place where the sun was in the sky on that day at that time and how the cattle looked" (98). Not only does she invariably remove the material she collects from the contingencies that inform it, but she calls the process by which she gathers it "picking up knowledge" (96). Beyond the construction of local detail in terms of knowledge as finished product, Butala's assimilation of local detail bears the same problematic signature of the liberalism and appropriating politics that characterize multiculturalism and colonialism: "by learning to name things in my new environment, by discovering the scheme of the place and the way the parts fit together, I was *making them my own*, and by this I was slowly healing myself' (99; emphasis added). At the same time that she reiterates her narrative's drama of ego-destitution (as an urban person) and subjectivization by Nature, she also cites, in a performative fashion, the cultural norms and practices that she critiques elsewhere in the text. These assimilation strategies demonstrate that her spiritual journey is propelled by the same desire for the development of humanity that inspired the anthropological and ethnographic projects devised since the Enlightenment (see, for instance Young 29-89). The same belief that marked colonial expansion as a project of benign intentions —the grafting of Western values onto native cultures— is also at work in *The Perfection.*

> If I had left behind a lot —a career, family, friends, an established round of life— and gone into what seemed a void, where I had begun, I thought irrevocably, to sink into its black depths, slowly a whole new light was dawning, and I was beginning to feel as Christopher Columbus must have when he first saw the shores of the New World: tremendous excitement, joy and relief. And this must also have included, for Columbus as it did for me, a measure of chagrin to discover it was already populated by people who took for granted and understood what for us was a world of immeasurable treasure and wonder. (149)

Her identification with Columbus, together with her colonialist trope of *terra nullius*, situates *The Perfection* on the same continuum with the expansionist logic of Western history. Despite Butala's claims to the contrary, the Nature that speaks to and through her is merely a performative rendering of the discourse of the same Big Other that sanctioned colonialism. If, as Masao Miyoshi says, "the colonialists found a politicoeconomical as well as moral-mythical foundation on which to build their policy and apology" in the... imagined [or manufactured] community" 'of the nation-states around 1800 in the West (82; brackets in the original), we find a similar foundationalism in Butala's project.

TRANSCENDENT LOCAL/GLOBAL LOCAL

Butala denounces global movements that threaten the ecological balance of nature, castigates environmentalists for seeing "Nature... as manageable, sustainable resources" (206), celebrates indigenous sensibilities and spiritualities as the

ideal substitute for scientific rationality, and promulgates local knowledge - gestures which, as Arif Dirlik says, repudiate the teleology of modernity (27). Yet, despite her ameliorative and region-specific rhetoric, and precisely because she merely inverts, rather than deconstructing, the values embedded in the logic of modernity, the return to Nature she advocates, as I hope to have shown, shares the salutary and euphoric elements of certain kinds of globalism-as-neocolonialism. Perhaps the popular success of *The Perfection*, what has prompted me to write about this book in the first place, is an example of the phenomenon that, as a number of intellectuals have observed, it is a certain kind of localists that prevail over globalization arguments today. The question is what kind of localist Butala is. If it is relocation from the urban world to Nature that "heals" her Self, it is a similar kind of relocation that she proposes as the solution to environment problems and globalization:

> I have no doubt that there are many people, from former farmers driven off their land to people aching to get out of the city, who would be overjoyed, if given a salary, good advice and equipment, to move onto quarter or half sections in need of reseeding and/or nurturing and to devote their lives to this project as stewards of the land.
> I don't think the repopulation of the Great Plains will be easy, nor do I claim to have a clear notion of how to do it. But *any such repopulation has to be based on a belief in what I have been saying, that in a renewed relationship with Nature as a people, and in a flourishing rural life, lies the salvation and the foundation of our nation*. First we have to begin with the vision and with the desire; we do not lack the wit to bring it about; what we require is leadership. (206; emphasis added)

This is the closest Butala comes to translating her spiritual vision into social terms. The problem with her project lies not so much in that she has no "clear notion" of how we should go about it, but in the fundamental inability of her vision to perceive that a return to the land, let alone to Nature, that is not accompanied by a radical questioning of "the foundation of our nation" will only further solidify what is wrong with this nation's foundation in the first place.[19]

Of all the contradictions that mark Butala's narrative, this is perhaps the most troubling one. For her proposal to create "stewards of the land" through a welfare system introduced and managed by the state relegates the land to a technology of (re)localization that pays no heed to what the production of local subjects entails, but also disregards how these subjects will engage with the local knowledge of that locality (Appadurai 180-1). Such a project of relocation, imaged and executed as it would be under the auspices of "our nation," would produce a new order of "diaspora," but one whose social and political boundedness would be no different

[19] The concrete solutions she has her characters enact in her novel, *The Garden of Eden*, are fraught with similar problems (see Kerber).

in principle from the ethnic, racial and class ghettoized neighborhoods —themselves kinds of enforced localities— we are familiar with. This kind of movement, though imagined, in part, as a corrective response to transnational mobility, would remain, by default, embedded within the same social and political structures that have caused the dislocation of indigenous peoples, and most recently, for example, the various cycles of economic disasters that have afflicted prairie farmers.[20] Some localities, as Appadurai has argued, exist as sites "of nationally appropriated nostalgias," and are part of "the project of the nation-state" —what Butala advocates; others "represent a perennial source of entropy and slippage," and for this reason they "need to be policed almost as thoroughly as borders" (190-91)— precisely what Butala's national project of relocalization would require for its implementation. It is a good thing, then, at least according to this reader, that Butala's locality is just a dream, for it could materialize only through docile subjects or through subjects that would have to be disciplined.

CODA

In *Wild Stone Heart*, Butala and her husband "donate[] some of their best native grassland to the Nature Conservancy of Canada" (101-2), their goal being to see that area turn to its "original northern Great Plains grass" land (103). When they discover that that area was originally Nekaneet territory, they invite the Nekaneet from the nearby reserve to join the ceremony "celebrat[ing] the establishment of the preserve" (115).

[20] I am writing this a few weeks after the recent mass demonstration of farmers in Saskatchewan.

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