Reading landscape in Gerald Murnane’s *The Plains*
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Plainsmen commonly consider all art to be the scant visible evidence of immense processes in a landscape that even the artist scarcely perceives, so that they confront the most obdurate or the most ingenuous work utterly receptive and willing to be led into bewildering vistas of vistas (Gerald Murnane, *The Plains* (Melbourne: Nostrilia, 1982), p. 123).

I. Setting the scene

Gerald Murnane has long been a writer’s writer in Australia, with a relatively modest readership, but all that has changed recently with a spate of awards and a Nobel Prize nomination. The rise in Murnane’s public profile was confirmed last year when the American republication of two of his novels was marked by an essay-length review in *The New York Review of Books* by Nobel laureate and fellow antipodean, J. M. Coetzee. In spite of Murnane’s recent ascent to international prominence there remains very little critical discussion of his work outside of Australia and the two small enclaves of his admirers in Sweden and the United States. This essay hopes to go some way to rectifying this state of affairs by drawing prospective readers’ attention to the unique treatment of the physical environment in Murnane’s classic Australian novel, *The Plains*. Particular attention will be paid to the way Murnane’s characters interpret their environment and the ontological understandings they reach as a result of this interpretative process.

This essay’s reading of *The Plains* will rely on the work of contemporary geo-theorists like Donald Meinig and Kenneth Olwig who conceive of landscape as a construct of the human imagination. For these theorists landscape is the product of an interpretative process in which the individual tries to order the vast array of sense data heaped on them by the external world, the environment. Such a theory of landscape, which will be further expanded on in a subsequent section of this essay, is a helpful way of explaining the prominence afforded characters’ subjective responses to their environment in *The Plains*. It appears that Murnane himself ascribes to a theory of landscape and environment consonant with that of Meinig and Olwig. Murnane has revealed that he sometimes feels that his physical surroundings are demanding to be interpreted, and further that he considers landscape to be a product of the mind.

The importance of the physical environment, and characters’ responses to that environment, to Murnane’s fiction cannot be overstated. In an interview with Susanne Braun-Bau Murnane said the following: ‘My books are mostly about landscapes, because for me the world is mostly made up of landscapes. If you handed me a book of philosophy, I’d end up thinking of it as a book of landscapes.’ Although there are some important passages devoted to landscape in Murnane’s first two novels it was not until his third, *The Plains*, that the interpretation of


the environment first became an obsession for the characters. In *The Plains* landscape is not merely a backdrop for interactions between characters but is itself a focus; the characters’ engagement with their physical surroundings is an intrigue central to the novel. Like all humans, the characters in *The Plains* are always in the environment, and it is the experience of this immersion that they seek to understand.

The narrator of *The Plains* is a film-maker from an unnamed Australian coastal city, most likely modelled on Murnane’s birthplace, Melbourne. The narrative charts the film-maker’s two decade stay in an inland region, known simply as ‘the plains,’ characterised by slightly undulating grasslands receding into haze. The film-maker initially travels to the plains intending to capture the essence of the enigmatic local landscape, and commit it to film. As the novel progresses though, it becomes clear that the narrator’s is a doomed project; by the novel’s conclusion he has not taken a single shot though he has composed thousands of pages of prefatory notes and research material.

That the novel is concerned with the interpretation of landscape is apparent from the first page, where the narrator describes his arrival on the plains:

> Twenty years ago, when I first arrived on the plains, I kept my eyes open. I looked for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances…the flat land around me seemed more and more a place that only I could interpret (*The Plains*, p. 3).

In a rare public comment on the novel Murnane suggested that it might be read as ‘the story of a man who tried to see properly.’ This essay is concerned with unpacking the characters’ engagements with landscape in *The Plains* and articulating the understanding of landscape they eventually arrive at, when they ‘see properly.’

The task this essay sets for itself is no easy one. Despite the fact that Murnane’s characters constantly try to interpret their surroundings their narrator only rarely deigns to clearly articulate the results of these interpretative processes. In *The Plains* a group of people thought it necessary to ‘provoke the intellectuals of the plains to define in metaphysical terms what had previously been expressed in emotional or sentimental language’ (*The Plains*, 28). This same injunction could be directed at Murnane’s narrator in regard to his descriptions of the characters’ experiences of their natural surroundings. Despite the numerous—and obviously significant—instances of engagement with the environment in *The Plains* it remains difficult to articulate exactly what metaphysical order, if any, Murnane’s characters become aware of. This definitional difficulty is a product of the rich ambiguity of Murnane’s prose as well as his, or his narrator’s, professed aversion to philosophical and theoretical frameworks. At one point in *The Plains* the narrator admits that he ‘had always had the greatest difficulty in understanding what metaphysics were’ (*The Plains*, 28). Similarly, in his book of essays Murnane expressed his distaste for all systems of organisation not devised by himself. Yet Murnane admits, almost in the same breath, that ‘I have sometimes thought of the whole enterprise of my fiction-writing as an effort to bring to light an underlying order’ (‘The breathing author’, 162).

This essay will proffer one possible ‘underlying order’ that Murnane’s characters can be seen to arrive at through their interpretations of landscape. This underlying order will be both physical and ontological, and will be informed by Martin Heidegger’s conception of ‘Being-in-the-world’. Although a number of critics have hinted at

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5 Murnane, ‘The breathing author’, p. 163.
the echoes of Heidegger in Murnane’s fiction the two have not yet been brought together in any depth.7 In fact, very little work has been done to extract any ontological position from Murnane’s fiction, let alone his characters’ engagements with landscape. Imre Salusinszky’s monograph on Murnane purports to find a strain of solipsism underlying the fiction but does not account for the characters’ engagements with landscape in this respect. The only other book-length study of Murnane’s writing advocates for a totally different ontological armature. The book is Grasses that Have No Fields by the Swedish translator of Murnane, Harald Fawkner. Fawkner reads the grassy plains of another novel of Murnane’s, Inland, to be symbolic of a phenomenological zone of constitution.9 While this essay will be indebted to Salusinszky and Fawkner at a number of points it doubts the applicability of their respective ontologies to The Plains. Such doubt is based on the fact that neither critic’s reading can account for the importance of the physical qualities of the plains to Murnane’s characters. In this essay’s reading of The Plains the characters will be shown to arrive at their ontological understanding of the world through their experience of interpreting their physical surroundings.10

This essay will progress by first, expanding on the theory of landscape as a product of subjective interpretation; and second, adumbrating Heidegger’s conception of Being-in-the-world. These theoretical discussions will provide the necessary context for the remainder of the essay, which will comprise a close reading of one particular passage of The Plains. The chosen passage recounts a representative moment from the novel in which a character has a profound experience of their surroundings. This experience will be unpacked and shown to result in an understanding of the physical and supra-physical world that is consistent with Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-world. In its closing paragraphs this essay provide a brief argument for the significance of Murnane’s treatment of landscape in The Plains and restate this essay’s position in the existing scholarship on the novel.

II. The theory of landscape relied upon—landscape as interpretation

The idea that looking at one’s topographical surroundings involves an act of interpretation derives from the work of landscape theorists such as Meinig, Olwig and others.11 For these theorists the word ‘landscape’ denotes the individual observer’s subjective interpretation of the physical surroundings, arrived at by ordering the sensual impressions or sense-data received from these surrounds.12 Landscape is thus distinguished from ‘environment,’ which describes a physical space or location that exists independently of individual consciousness of it. Meinig elegantly articulates the important distinction between landscape and environment when he writes: ‘Landscape is, first of all, the unity we see, the impressions of our senses rather than the logic of the sciences.’13

In the view of theorists like Meinig an individual existing in an environment will, at any given time, be interpreting the vast array of sense-data he or she is receiving through the faculties of sight, touch, smell et cetera. Through this interpretative process the individual attempts to construct a cohesive, unified ‘picture.’14 Such an

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8 Harald William Fawkner, Grasses that Have No Fields: From Gerald Murnane’s Inland to a Phenomenology of Isogonic Constitution (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2006).
9 Fawkner, Grasses, p. 20.
10 Given Murnane’s reluctance to ascribe to any particular philosophical order it is not the intention of this essay to foist such a system onto Murnane himself. Rather, this essay aims only to define the ontological order that best fits the descriptions of characters’ engagements with landscape in The Plains.
12 Meinig, p. 3; Olwig, pp. 871-877.
13 Meinig, p. 2.
14 Tuan, p. 90.
understanding of the word ‘landscape’ is expressed in the following dictum from Yi-Fu Tuan: ‘Landscape appears to us through an effort of the imagination exercised over a highly selected array of sense data.’ Simon Schama adopts a similar position when he writes: ‘Landscape is...constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.’ Schama, Tuan and others stress the ‘imaginative effort’ required for the individual to ‘see’ landscape. What is clear in the account of these writers is that landscape is not an immutable essence; rather it is always the product of an individual’s act of interpretative construction.

A number of critics have used versions of the above theory of landscape as a lens through which to read The Plains, most notably Paul Carter, Gillian Tyas, Nicholas Birns and Salusinszky. Tyas identifies the characters in the novel to be applying their own subjectively coloured meanings to the external environment with which they find themselves confronted. Similarly, Carter writes the following: ‘[s]trictly speaking, Murnane’s “plains” are a creative region, geography repossessed for the imagination to configure it differently.’ Expanding on the creative element of the process of landscape construction and the link between landscape and environment in The Plains Carter explains: ‘landscape is composed in equal measure of recollection, imagination and invention.’

Birns and Salusinszky have both relied on a particular passage from The Plains to support their assertions that characters ‘interpret’ their physical surroundings. The passage, in its entirety, runs as follows:

[the plains] are not...a vast theatre that adds significance to the events enacted within it. Nor are they an immense field for explorers of every kind. They are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings (The Plains, p. 141).

It is easy to see why these two critics have chosen this particular narratorial utterance; the speaker seems to unambiguously support a dematerialised view of landscape in which it is purely the product of the human mind. On this view the rolling grasslands of The Plains are merely ‘a Rorschach blot for human projections.’ To suggest that this passage definitively disappears landscape into the human mind would result in a disingenuous reading of Murnane’s novel, and Birns, to his credit, acknowledges as much. For the narrator of The Plains landscape is accepted to be the product of the human mind. Yet at the same time the narrator knows the mentally constructed landscape has its origins, its causal grounding, in the physical reality of the surrounding environment. It is this link between environment and landscape that leads Birns to concede that if landscape is a metaphor then the source of the metaphor is as important as the metaphor itself. Accordingly, this essay’s reading of The Plains pays attention to both the physical environment being observed and the subjective response to that environment.

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15 Tuan, p. 90.
16 Schama, p. 61.
17 Tuan, p. 97.
20 Carter, p. 148.
21 Carter, p. 155.
22 Birns, p. 74; Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane, p. 45.
23 Birns, p. 74.
24 Birns, p. 74.
25 Birns, p. 75.
III. The ontology relied upon—Being-in-the-world

In Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-world the conscious individual is always-already in the world. Heidegger takes exception to the French philosopher René Descartes, who asserted that any sound ontological theory had to begin with the idea of an isolated individual consciousness.26 For Heidegger, Descartes’ starting point was an artificial and naïve one. After all, the individual first becomes aware of itself as it exists ‘in the world,’ to forget or deny this original ‘worldliness’ would be to misrepresent the situation from the outset. Heidegger prefers to start from the position that the individual exists, first and foremost, in the mode of Being-in-the-world. This much is established, according to Heidegger, by the fact that ‘Being-in-the-world is something of which one has pre-phenomenological experience and acquaintance.’27 It is important to be alert to the fact that the phrase ‘Being-in-the-world’ does not employ the word ‘in’ to denote physical-spatial presence. Accordingly, when Heidegger writes ‘world’ he is not describing the purely physical world.28 Rather, Heidegger’s world is both physical and supra-physical, it combines all entities that present themselves to the individual whether these entities be tangible or abstract. Magda King, a contemporary Heidegger scholar, has said that Heidegger’s ‘[world] is an existential-ontological concept.’29

The individual’s knowledge of his or her existence as Being-in-the-world is a different sort of knowledge to that directional knowledge whereby the subject ‘knows’ an object. Heidegger notes that while knowledge has been traditionally set up as ‘a relation between subject and Object’30 this relation cannot apply to the individual’s relation to the world. Heidegger writes: ‘Self and the world belong together. [They] are not two beings, like subject and object [but]…the unity of Being-in-the-world.’31

Salusinszky and Fawkner both identify such an erasure of the subject/object binary in Murnane’s fiction. Salusinszky writes that ‘[the plains] are neither mind nor world, but precisely where we find ourselves as soon as we have stopped thinking about things that way.’32 Writing on Inland, Fawkner identifies a plane of existence more fundamental than the subject/object split. Fawkner’s fundamental plane of unity is ‘that which, this side of objects as well as subjects, brings the subjective-objective flanks of the world to view.’33 For Fawkner, the grasslands in Murnane’s fiction are an extended metaphor for the omnipresent zone of givenness that he identifies as undergirding existence.34

This essay is beholden to Salusinszky and Fawkner for their recognition that the subject/objet binary loses traction in Murnane’s fiction. These two theorists use this position to propound readings of landscape that relegate it to the realm of consciousness. This essay is not so solipsistic, providing instead a dual level account of characters’ engagements with the environment in The Plains. On this account the characters respond to their physical surroundings by first forming a landscape in which they view themselves as implicated in the physical world. It is only after, or on top of, this understanding of the physical world that the characters form a concomitant appreciation of their immersion in the Heideggerian existential-ontological world.

27 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 86.
28 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 79.
30 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 87.
32 Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane, p. 44. Putting it another way Salusinszky writes: ‘the philosophy of the plains…[entails] the bracketing of the whole dialectic of mind and world’ (Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane, p. 45).
33 Fawkner, Grisses, p. 20.
34 Fawkner, Grisses, p. 60.
IV. Worked example—the blue-green haze on the horizon

The setting of The Plains is, unsurprisingly, mostly made up of sparsely vegetated rolling plains. While such an environment might appear, at first glance, to be an uninspiring setting for fiction, it is the contention of this essay that it proves exactly the opposite. In its vague and spacious generality the physical space of the plains has both a physical and ontological effect on the characters. On the one hand, the characters interpreting this vast landscape come to an awareness of the essential givenness of the physical world—its infinite scope and inevitable encapsulation of the individual. At the same time though, an ontological awareness also arises concerning the individual’s immersion in the realm of Being. Such a definition of Murnane’s characters’ experience of the plains can be mapped closely onto Heidegger’s conception of Being-in-the-world. The body of this essay will now be given over to the analysis of one representative instance from The Plains where a character interprets their surroundings in such a way as to come to an awareness of their implication in both the physical and existential-ontological worlds.

Relatively early in The Plains the narrator describes an ideological split between inhabitants of the plains on the basis of their identification with either of two groups, the Haremen and the Horizonites. These two groups advocate oppositional approaches to viewing their physical surroundings. The Haremen view their surrounds on a micro level—conducting detailed studies of ‘small patch[es] of native grasses and herbage’ (The Plains, p. 30). By contrast, the Horizonites view the environment on a macro level—preferring to look upon plains stretching away into ‘misty distances’ (The Plains, p. 32). It is the Horizonites’ response to landscape that will be analysed here. The narrator says of the Horizonites:

what moved them more than the wide grasslands and huge skies was the scant layer of haze where land and sky merged in the farthest distance…[they talked] of the blue-green haze as though it were itself a land—a plain of the future, perhaps, where one might live a life that existed only in potentiality…[T]he blue-green veil…urged them to dream of a different plain (The Plains, p. 29).

In the Horizonites’ experience the environment of the plains is both a physical horizon and a trigger for ontological reflection. The specific aspect of the landscape that moves the Horizonites is the blue-green band of haze on the horizon. In the following close reading of this important passage the characters will be shown to be arriving at an understanding of themselves as Being-in-the-world. This understanding is precipitated by two elements of their subjective landscape of the plains: first, the infinite space implied by the horizon-line; and second, the dissolution of physical boundaries mandated by the blue-green haze.

(a) The horizon-line

The Horizonites are entranced not by the ‘foreground’ of their surroundings but by the distant point at which land meets sky—the horizon.35 The word ‘horizon’ derives from the Greek ‘horizōn (kuklos)’ meaning ‘limiting (circle);’36 but the horizon is not just a limit or an endpoint, not the ‘farthest distance’ (The Plains, p. 29) that the narrator suggests it to be. In fact, the horizon marks only an illusory end to the earth’s surface—it constitutes a limit to one’s visual perception of the earth rather than any limit to the physical reality of the earth itself. At one point in The Plains the narrator alludes to the illusory nature of the horizon by calling it ‘the reputed horizon’ (The Plains, p. 110). The idea that the horizon might constitute a physical boundary has been accepted as a fallacy since humans became aware that the horizon could be pushed back—to reveal more of the earth’s surface—by the act of

walking towards it or elevating one’s viewpoint. As such, the horizon-line marks not just an outer boundary to the physical world but also the beginning of the invisible. This is why the horizon has such an important place in the Horizonites’ landscape of the plains—it offers an intimation of the infinite space beyond it, the infinite extension of the physical realm, or the Universe.

The phenomenon of the horizon-line implies the extension of physical space in two respects. First, the horizon-line suggests the extension of the Earth’s surface as it curves away from view. The slight convexity of the horizon-line indicates to the observer that it is the spherical shape of the Earth that is preventing him or her from seeing any more of its surface. This indirect attention to the ‘true configuration of the earth’ (The Plains, p. 11) compels the observer—the Horizonite—to attend to the fact that the Earth is a planet; that is, a spherical body suspended in space. In acknowledging the curvature of the Earth, the Horizonites indirectly find themselves confronted with the task of imagining the Earth’s place in the Universe. Barry Oakley calls this element of the Horizonites’ landscape the ‘horizontal equivalent of vertigo.’

This difficult act of imagining the earth as a planetary sphere can be likened to the experience of the astronaut first seeing the Earth from space. The astronaut’s experience of looking back on the Earth, or ‘Earth gazing,’ has been well documented and found to sometimes lead to an experience known as the ‘overview effect.’ In the ‘overview effect’ the observer cannot avoid the difficult act of positioning him or herself in relation to the Earth-as-planet and the infinitely extending Universe. The result of the ‘overview effect’ is often that the individual comes to terms with his or her implication in the Universe, and concomitantly accepts the essential unity of the physical realm. It is the contention of this essay that when the Horizonites look at the horizon they experience something like the ‘overview effect’ in that they become aware of their position relative to the world-as-planet, and their immersion in the space of the Universe. Salusinszky is also convinced that something like the overview effect is at play in Murnane’s fiction, he writes: ‘Murnane’s recent fiction becomes more and more interested in this “ultimate” instance of perspectivisation—the fact that the whole planet is rolling through who-knows-what.’

The second way in which the horizon-line implies the infinite extension of space is that it marks the point at which the trajectory of the observer’s gaze leaves the surface of the Earth and extends into the sky. The experience of looking at the sky has been revealed to be a difficult one by the perception-theorist James Gibson. The difficulty arises, according to Gibson, from the fact that humans are most comfortable looking at surfaces and the sky is a surface-less phenomenon. When looking at the sky, the Horizonite observer must accept the absolute lack of anchor for the gaze. Granted, the eye can rest on the edge of the earth, the line of the horizon, but the viewer cannot avoid that which exists above this line—pure, uninterrupted space. This space, and the absence of anything visible in it, is in turn an indicator of the infinite extension of cosmic space. In looking at the horizon, the individual is also looking beyond the horizon, into the infinite depth of cosmic space. The Horizonites’ experience of the depth of the sky thus parallels that of a character in a later one of Murnane’s books who spends pages trying to describe his experience of looking into a particular sky, he concludes: ‘I can see more deeply into this sky than I have seen into any other, I seem to be looking at a part of the sky so deep it is not meant to be looked at’ (Velvet Waters, p. 158). If an observer looking deep into the sky really attends to what he or she is looking at he or she will likely ‘fear the hugeness of horizons’ (The Plains, p. 49) as Murnane’s plainsmen do. Arthur Schopenhauer has phrased this encounter with the infinite differently, calling it ‘an awareness of the immensity of the universe’s extent.’ Schopenhauer has suggested, correctly in the submission of this essay, that

40 Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane, p. 86.
such an awareness will lead to an appreciation of the unity of the physical realm and one’s integration in this unity.43 This experience of belonging within a grand physical unity is exactly that which the Horizonites are moved by when gazing at the horizon of the plains.

But it is not only an appreciation of Being-in-the physical world that the Horizonites arrive at through looking at the horizon. Attention to the horizon of the plains also leads the Horizonites to an understanding of their place in the metaphysical scheme of things. This is because in their interpretative imagining of the plains the Horizonites are spurred to reflect not only on what lies beyond the physical horizon but also what lies beyond the horizon of perception. The horizon, by highlighting that which cannot be seen, draws the mind not only to the parts of the physical world which cannot be seen but also to the world that cannot be seen—the world of consciousness and the Self.44 Murnane’s characters are constantly constructing landscapes that allow them to use the physical environment as a means of visualising or imagining the ontological realms of Being and the Self.45 To provide just one example, the film-maker in The Plains intends to have a sequence in his film where the male lead ‘saw, at the furthest limits of his awareness, unexplored plains. And when he looked for what he was surest of in himself, there was little more definite than plains’ (The Plains, pp. 78-79).

Accordingly, it is contended that the Horizonites’ understanding of their place in the physical world of the plains is accompanied by an understanding of their place in the existential-ontological world. This causal link between the characters’ understanding of the physical and ontological worlds is apparent from the narrator’s statement that ‘people here conceive of a lifetime as one more sort of plain’ (The Plains, p. 114). So it is that when the Horizonites view the horizon line of the plains to give intimations of the infinite extent of physical space, so too do they understand the perception limits, or horizons, of solipsism to be illusory. Instead of adopting the insular cogito of Descartes the Horizonites understand the essential implication of the Self in the broader realm of Being. Such an understanding aligns with what Heidegger calls Being-in-the-world, in which the world is the all-encompassing condition for the individual’s existence.46

(b) The blue-green haze47

Another element of the environment that contributes to the Horizonites’ understanding of Being-in-the-world is the ‘zone of haze’ at the point ‘where land and sky merged’ (The Plains, p. 29). There are two aspects of the zone of haze that are especially conducive to an understanding of Being-in-the-world. These are the haze’s formlessness, and its colour—somewhere between blue and green.

As a formless phenomenon the haze encourages the Horizonites to consider the solubility of conventionally accepted boundaries, the ‘blurring of distinctions’ (The Plains, p. 110) that the narrator worries about. On a physical level the haze appears to merge into both land and sky. In doing so it challenges the Horizonites’ received

43 Schopenhauer, paragraph 39.
44 Genoni has written than Murnane is always writing ‘with the intention of reaching an understanding of the metaphysical rather than the physical qualities of the land’ (Paul Genoni, Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction (Melbourne: Common Ground, 2004), p. 95).
46 The horizon’s potential to yield revelatory knowledge is alluded to in a later piece of Murnane’s fiction in which a character looking at the horizon-line senses that he is ‘about to learn something of value’ (Gerald Murnane, A History of Books (Sydney: Giramondo, 2012), p. 40).
47 This image of a blurred band of ambiguous colour at the horizon arises at a number of points in Murnane’s fiction after The Plains, including: Gerald Murnane, Emerald Blue (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1995), p. 127; Murnane, A History of Books, p. 40.
idea that the surfaces of physical entities constitute immutable and inviolable boundaries. Land and sky, though composed of different substances, surrender their status as sovereign entities as the haze implicates both into an apparent unity of materiality. This unity of materiality is all encompassing; land merges with sky, sky merges with atmosphere, and atmosphere merges with space, *ad infinitum*.

But the formlessness of the haze does not just demand a new conception of the world; it also has implications for the Horizonites’ idea of the Self. If the haze succeeds in calling into question the significance of surfaces as boundaries then the Horizonites must reconsider their idea of their own corporeal being. The outer layer of skin which separates the human body from the material world suddenly seems like a rather flimsy demarcation; the skin being just another substance between substances.\(^{48}\) ‘The skin is not even a stable barrier; it is a porous membrane—another one of the narrator’s ‘deceptive surfaces’ (*The Plains*, p. 110)—absorbing and excreting material from within and without.

Through the ramifying implications of the haze’s formlessness it becomes apparent that the physical world can be conceived of as a unity into which the individual’s corporeal body is implicated. What should also be apparent is that the consideration of the haze’s formlessness has ontological implications. A challenge to the individual’s corporal sovereignty cannot but be accompanied by a challenge to the *idea* of the Self. As the body begins to show itself to be implicated in the physical world so too does the ontological understanding of the Self become ‘en-worlded.’ As the Horizonites come to an understanding of their implication in the physical plains they also ‘dream’ of an ontological plane in which the Self is similarly enmeshed as a Being-in-the-world.

The colour of the haze—blue-green—forms another significant aspect of the Horizonites’ landscape of the plains, and it too goes toward their awareness of the solubility of boundaries. A number of critics have identified colours as important metaphorical devices throughout Murnane’s *oeuvre* and the present case proves no exception.\(^{49}\) In this particular evocation of colour two definite colours are named, conjointed by a hyphen. The Horizonites’ use of a hybrid colour to describe the haze is further acknowledgement that this amorphous physical phenomenon eludes discrete categorisation. Blue is a primary colour, but green is already the product of a combination of two colours, blue and yellow. So in combining blue and green, dilution is being compounded by dilution, with the result uncertain, identifiable as neither blue nor green. This bleeding of colours prefigures a moment from one of Murnane’s later novels where: ‘Colours spilled over what should have been their boundaries. Many a colour had traces of another colour showing through from underneath’ (*Inland*, p. 81).

The qualifying hyphen between blue and green in *The Plains* is not simply a short black line joining two words on a page of text. The line of the hyphen becomes symbolic of the infinitely divisible continuum of the colour spectrum and the countless species of blue-green that exist between the coordinates of blue and green. Further, considering Murnane’s practice of imbuing colours with transcendent properties,\(^{50}\) the Horizonites’ fascination with the ‘blue-green veil’ (*The Plains*, p. 29) at the horizon can be read to suggest the blurring of metaphysical as well as physical boundaries. The Horizonites’ ontological realm can thus be likened to a colour spectrum where each entity merges with its immediate neighbours so as to create an indissoluble fabric of Being. The Horizonites’ appreciation of this indissoluble unity is precipitated by their being ‘moved’ by the blue-green haze at the horizon. In this experience, the Horizonites come to an understanding of themselves, not as individual entities but as Beings-in-the-world.

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\(^{48}\) The narrator in the next of Murnane’s novels expresses something like this view of the human body: ‘I thought of myself as a skin-covered parcel of nerves and muscles and blood-vessels – and nothing more’ (Murnane, *Landscape with Landscape*, p. 126).


V. Conclusion

One of the achievements of *The Plains*, the one that this essay has focused on, is that it provides a richly complex rendering of a few people’s attempts to interpret and draw meaning from their physical surroundings. The novel does this at such a level of abstraction that it remains relevant for readers, and ‘landscapers,’ who live nowhere near the remote region in which it is set. The novel can be read by anyone for the way its characters respond to, and find meaning in, their broad and generous surroundings.

This essay takes a unique place within existing scholarship on Murnane’s fiction. It positions itself between the two authoritative voices of Salusinszky and Fawkner. While rejecting Salusinszky’s solipsism this essay has not fully adopted Fawkner’s phenomenological account of Murnane’s writing. Instead, an approach has been carved out that neither denies nor relies upon the existence of the ‘real’ world, but focuses on Heidegger’s existential-ontological world. Heidegger’s philosophy has been used in an informative rather than procrustean manner; there has been no attempt to account for every element of *Being and Time* in *The Plains*. Rather, it has been suggested that Murnane’s characters’ interpretations of the plains result in a worldview that generally conforms to Heidegger’s ontological structure of Being-in-the-world. As this essay is only the second systematic exploration of a possible ontology of Murnane’s fiction—the first being Fawkner’s—rebuttal and counter-suggestion is anticipated and invited.