

Landscape as Not-Belonging:

The Plains, earth writing, and

the impossibilities of

inhabitation.

The Plains #1

On the penultimate page of Gerald Murnane's short novel *The Plains*, the nameless narrator offers an unusually direct summary of his predicament. He tells us that 'the more I strove to depict even one distinctive landscape – one arrangement of light and surfaces to suggest a moment on some plain I was sure of – the more I would lose myself in the manifold ways of words with no known plains behind them'ⁱ.

Among other things, we are being given a succinct and elegant definition of *landscape* here – it is an arrangement of lighting, surfaces and time. This is a visual, even cinematographic definition, and the narrator of *The Plains* does indeed present himself as an aspiring film-maker. But despite setting out to do so, he never makes a film, and barely even ever takes a picture, so far as I can tell, throughout the book. He *writes* instead. And the story that he tells is, I believe, about the impossibility that haunts all attempts at earth-writing. No matter how long you might dwell within a given landscape, no matter how far back your ancestry in a place might be traced, or how environmentally perceptive or skilled you might be, you cannot write the earth. It remains inaccessible and far beyond the reach of any writing, inscription or art. To express this another way, there are no original inhabitants. No earthly landscape is autochthonously inhabited or inscribed; there is instead an irretrievable and incessant distancing at work, both between 'earth' and 'writing' and also within these terms. This distancing untethers any claimed communion with, or capacity to represent, any given patch of ground.

Murnane's novel is set in 'Inner Australia', a vast but indeterminate land comprised of the eponymous plains and inhabited by a reclusive and leisured society, one whose chief focus in life is esoteric speculation about, and enervated contemplation of, the plains themselves.

1. Introduction

Geography is 'earth-writing': this is an etymology and meaning annually, if often wearily – or even warily – noted down by successive generations of undergraduate students of the subject. The context here is most commonly a set of introductory classes on the histories of geography, an obligatory rite of passage for the newly-enrolled. I teach some such classes myself. I note the geograph, the mythologised earth-text origins of the subject. Once safely passed through, however, most students need give no further thought to the relations between the earth and writing, or to the wider questions raised by these relations. These might include questions, for example, about the nature and purpose of geography as a practice of inquiry, or wider questions about the manner and meaning of human inhabitations of the earth.

Those who choose to pursue further study in human geography, and especially in cultural geography, *will* likely find ideas about 'earth-writing' recurring in various ways, as they encounter more detailed excavations of geography's histories, and as they are introduced to more contemporary concerns and approaches in the subject. They will be invited to think, for instance, about how landscapes, places and natures are narrated and performed in acts of writing, and to consider further how this may relate to senses and scales of belonging and identity – or indeed to senses of alienation and alterity.

In this paper, my aim is to work towards an argument that landscape names a *not-belonging*, through which 'earth' and 'experience' can be understood as non-coincident with themselves and each other. I begin by discussing some general disciplinary apprehensions of 'earth writing' within geography; mindful that I am writing here as a cultural geographer in a journal of literary criticism. I then focus upon a more specific understanding of landscape as the inhabited and storied earth. This leads in turn to a final substantive discussion of landscape as not-belonging – as a distancing which questions any sense of 'earth writing' as a communion of world and world.

Running alongside and through this discussion, I also offer a sequence of commentaries on Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*. The first of these has already introduced the paper, and two further such will

be interspersed between the main substantive sections of the paper. A fourth commentary on *The Plains* will finally serve to conclude the paper as a whole. I choose to design and present the paper in this fashion chiefly because I am reluctant to present *The Plains* as a discrete, final 'case' which somehow straightforwardly exemplifies my conceptual argument here. It seems more apt to introduce it alongside and in parallel, so to speak. *The Plains* is a multi-faceted, and even intentionally gnomic and parodic text, and I think that the illumination it offers, in respect of thinking about landscape and belonging, is one arriving from a penetrating but oblique angle.

2. Writing Worlds in Geography: a brief history.

Imprint. This is one particular word that cultural geographers, especially in the first few decades of the twentieth century, commonly used to describe the relations between humans and environmentsⁱⁱ. In this inaugural discourse, the cultural landscape was defined as the imprint of human activities upon the physical environment. Metaphor had thus already crept in to what was, in many ways, a decidedly un-literary enterprise. Humanity was conceived of as a printing press, a stamping and pressing mechanism, leaving its mark indelibly, but crucially also intelligibly, upon the receptive vellum surface of the earth. The expert geographer could thus learn to decipher and read this earth-writing, especially by following narratives of the diffusion and spread of distinct cultural groups across landscapes, through the language of their architectures and agricultural patterns. The wider expression of a graceful, evolving reciprocity between humans and the land that characterised this genre of geography can be sensed, I think, in the word 'imprint' itself, which has a softer feel than some other words often used to describe the human-environment relation. 'Impact', for example, with its presupposition of a collision between two separate, antagonistic forces, ('human impact on the environment'), and its negative connotations of inevitable damage and despoliation.

But it is one thing to say that geography is the study of how humanity has imprinted itself onto the surface of the earth, and quite another to say that geographers themselves are practitioners of some kind of 'earth writing'. Emerging from a field science tradition geared towards encyclopaedic

compilation and description, and despite a longstanding association with anthropology (especially in North America), the work of geographers through the course of twentieth-century was not, as a rule, notable for reflections upon its own writing practice. Exceptions to this, such as the initial humanistic encounter with phenomenological and existential approaches in the nineteen-seventies, never quite became mainstream in geographyⁱⁱⁱ. Therefore, as late as nineteen-ninety two, it was plausible for an important new text to open with the bald statement that ‘very little attention is paid to writing in geography’,^{iv}.

This is the opening gambit of Trevor Barnes and James Duncan’s introduction to *Writing Worlds: discourse, text and metaphor in the representation of landscape*, a collection that quickly established itself as one of the defining moments of what became known as the ‘cultural turn’ in human geography. Their essay stands at a particularly fertile junction; one where what was initially called the ‘new cultural geography’ emerged from encounters with new ideas and currents from across the arts and humanities. Two of these in particular are stressed within Barnes and Duncan’s work – firstly, structuralist and post-structural literary theories of culture as signification and inscription, and secondly, arguments from anthropology and postcolonial theory regarding a ‘crisis of representation’ in Western scholarship, arising from a reckoning with its own historicity, its inescapable situatedness within myriad systems of othering, naturalising and universalising.

Twenty-five years on, many of the positions argued for in *Writing Worlds*, and in other noted books and papers from the same period, have become very profoundly embedded within cultural geography and human geography more widely^v. Arguments regarding the inseparability of writing, knowledge and power, for example. Or statements testifying to the centrality of texts, symbols and imagery in the mediation and construction of geographical knowledges and imaginations. The idea that landscapes, whether printed or visual, urban or rural, can be thought of as *texts* which may be read. The need for awareness and scrutiny of authorial and audience positions in the scripting and

reception of geographical texts. The baleful, distancing and alienating effects of writing which purports to offer accurate, unvarnished descriptions of the real.

But at the same time, some other new cultural positions *vis-à-vis* questions of texts and earth writing were quite quickly queried or discarded. Specifically, *Writing Worlds* appears now as the early apogee of a textualist or linguistic epistemology in geography. Barnes and Duncan argue that 'mimetic representation is a pipe-dream that should be abandoned'^{vi}, and this is a position that virtually all cultural geographers, working in varied critical and interpretative idioms, would still endorse. However when they also argue that 'there is only intertextuality...[and] writing is constitutive, not reflective; new worlds are made out of old texts'^{vii}, they cross a line into territory that most geographers seem to find debatable and inhospitable. In fact, I am not even sure that Barnes and Duncan themselves are completely comfortable in a world composed entirely of reading and writing, a world, that is, beyond any appeal to any 'ground truth' of a non-textual, asignifying material actuality. The individual chapters of *Writing Worlds* often retreat somewhat to a more structuralist and even at times ideological reading of landscape, in which metaphor and discourse are cloaking devices or codes, which the analyst must unmask or decipher, in order to reveal an underlying layer of prime reality, an un-metaphorical earth.

In this sense, even at the height of the textualist approach to cultural geography a certain bracketing-off of 'earth' and 'writing' was often still in play; a bracketing that simultaneously enabled two chimeric possibilities: that of an unwritten earth, and that of an earth transparently and truthfully described. Another way of putting this would be to say that cultural geographers were never especially comfortable with more radically poststructural rupturings of words and worlds – with a sense not simply of endless textual signification, but also of a necessary noncoincidence of word and world. This is true of Derrida's deconstructive concept of *differance*, for example, even though the noncoincidence of word and world is articulated there through terms such as spacing

and timing^{viii}. Only a select number of geographers have since pursued this oeuvre through to its later more explicitly ethical and political articulations^{ix}.

By the time we move into the early years of the twenty-first century, therefore, a specifically 'writerly' moment has passed, and it is perhaps fair to say that, for most practitioners, the focus of cultural geography has at least partially shifted again – and this time, so to speak, from 'writing' back to 'earth'. This shift is most clearly apparent in the rapid emergence of diverse new forms of materialist thinking - influential in recent years not just in geography of course, but across the humanities. Informed by renewed vitalist understandings of life and matter, by concepts of affect, atmosphere and assemblage, and by work from science studies emphasising the sustenance of human life within non-human, earthly, elemental and biological forces and flows, newly material geographies have moved decisively away from understandings of writing in terms of inscription or signification, and indeed from 'earth writing' as a core matter of concern *per se*^x. As Claire Colebrook notes, terms such as 'text' and 'discourse' have come to be negatively associated with an exclusively epistemological framework, one now viewed as insufficiently appraised of the vital ontological qualities of material worlds. In the wider context of an emphasis upon post-human and non-human conditions, a focus on writing can seem suspiciously humanist and anthropocentric in orientation^{xi}. In extremis, in some of the manifestos of speculative realism for example, recent generations of phenomenological and deconstructive thinking are condemned as 'correlationist', that is, as trapped within a solipsistic loop of their own making, a loop between thought and being that generates a sterile obsession with subjective perception, text, meaning and signification^{xii}.

Geography is an ineradicably empirical discipline in many ways, and my suspicion is that while many of those now embracing material geographies and life-geographies perspectives may not be overly preoccupied by the kinds of philosophical points just mentioned, they have been quite happy to dispense with an emphasis on writing, text and representation that seemed to be nudging the discipline towards the domains of the arts and humanities. Thus we have seen a new material return

to the kinds of substantive spatial phenomena that have long concerned geographers: transport, health, agriculture, population, to name a few. But, just as new kind of earthly and elemental materialism has taken centre-stage, so recent years have also seen the rise to prominence of a new suite of 'creative geographies', in which questions of writing have once more become prominent.

While the histories of geography are marked by occasional interventions or petitions on behalf of artistic and literary forms of geographical practice, it can be argued that the volume and variety of work now gathering under this heading of creative geographies is without clear precedent in the discipline^{xiii}. Creative geographies have involved researchers adopting and experimenting with a wide range of techniques and formats from the creative and performing arts: dance, digital performance and mediation, visual art, film and photography, sound art, craft work – and also, of course, forms of writing such as poetry, fiction, web-based writing and prose non-fiction narrative^{xiv}. The inspiration for this work comes in part from the injunctions towards the creative and experimental that have accompanied the ascendancy of affective, embodied and performative conceptions of subjectivity and spatiality. But the 'creative turn' is also, in some ways, the long-term, depth-charged outcome of the cultural turn, insofar as this generational re-orientation enabled, over a twenty-plus year period, unprecedentedly deep and sustained opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between cultural geographers and creative art practitioners. It is in this context that 'earth writing' potentially emerges anew today, I think – not only in ongoing critical analyses of literary geographies, but also in cultural geographers' own attempts to develop original narratives and fictions of landscape experience, evocations of site, travel, matter and memory, and creative interventions in debates over land, belonging and identity^{xv}. Some of my own work on landscape is situated within these spaces, and in the next section of the paper I will focus in more detail on landscape as a venue for exploring and disputing claims about the earth and writing.

To summarise before moving onward: although 'earth writing' is a well-known and commonly accepted definition and translation of geography, its reception in the discipline as a description of

both what geographers do, and their core object of study, has been more equivocal. With its longstanding field science and applied science norms and values, the discipline has often found it easy to push questions around the status of geographical writing in particular to the margins of debate. In recent decades, though, in common with most humanities and social science subjects, human geography experienced a surge of interest in the textual and the writerly, with the high tide of poststructuralism in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. As this tide has ebbed, the re-shaped landscape it has left behind is now marked both by reactions against the centrality of 'text' 'writing' and 'discourse', but also by renewed and dynamic interest in the creative and critical possibilities offered by different forms and genres of writing when it comes to the production of geographical knowledge.

The Plains #2

'Twenty five 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'^{xvi}.

These are the opening lines of Murnane's *The Plains*. Already, a key theme is announced; a quest to perceive a primary, possibly even pristine earthly reality, lying somewhere behind or beyond the superficial visible. By the book's final lines, however, we are in a very different place. They describe instead what seems like a definitively final moment, 'the moment when I lifted my own camera to my face and stood with my eye pressed against the lens and my finger poised as if to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself'^{xvii}.

The narrative arc of *The Plains* therefore traces a voyage from seeing to blindness, from illumination to darkness, from exterior to interior. And we conclude with a moment of seemingly supreme solipsism, with the camera lens turned around one hundred and eighty degrees, to focus inward, upon an inner darkness or blankness deep within the eye and the soul of the narrator.

A very brief synopsis of the novel would be as follows: the nameless narrator travels inland from the coastal margins of 'Outer Australia' in search of both the plains themselves, a kind of infinite but also infinitely variable flatland, but also a patron who might sponsor his filmic quest to capture them. The first section of the novel, comprising well over half its entire length, describes the narrator's saloon-bar encounter with a group of wealthy landowners (or 'plainsmen' – they are all men), one of whom agrees to become his patron. The shorter second and third sections of the book, set in the years following, mostly focus upon the narrator's obsession with the wife and the eldest daughter of his patron. He watches these female figures from a distance as they move through the libraries, pavilions and reception halls of the patron's vast mansion. For a text entitled 'the plains', it seems noteworthy that the vast majority of the action takes places indoors, in rooms and locations that are shadowy if not sepulchral in atmosphere. The book then concludes with a tableaux in which the narrator, reflecting upon his now decades-long but seemingly-fruitless quest to approach the plains, turns his camera upon himself, before the watching gaze of the patron and his companions.

Some critical commentaries on *The Plains* suggest that the text is about a failed quest^{xviii}. The movement from an initially outward-looking gaze to an inward-looking one is viewed as a gesture of defeat and even despair. The narrator ends with nothing to say or show about the plains, and even the final look within yields only further darkness. An alternative reading, however, might view this ending as a moment of insight and even revelation. The narrator has travelled from Outer to Inner Australia; the film he proposes to make about the plains is titled 'The Interior'. An ending which peers inside towards a mute darkness might be wholly apposite for a text which could be construed as being about the impossibilities of ultimately accessing either self or landscape. 'The landscape', Jean-Luc Nancy says, 'begins with a notion, however vague, of distancing and of a loss of sight'^{xix}. If nothing else, *The Plains* confirms this sense of landscape.

3. Landscape: the inhabited and storied earth.

The concept of landscape has a long association with earth writing, and also with the wider claim that geography is a form of writing. Landscape may, for example, be understood as both locus of inspiration for writing *and* as a form of writing or text in itself. Classically, as the geographer Denis Cosgrove wrote, landscape is the inhabited and thus inscribed and meaningful earth^{xx}. As noted above, this understanding sat at the core of cultural geography in its foundational period in the early years of the twentieth century, when landscape was viewed in terms of the dynamic relationships between humans and the non-human environments they inhabited and authored, through their agriculture, architecture and arts of living. As Chenxi Tang's work elucidates, this specifically geographical and academic sense of landscape emerged in turn from two interrelated nineteenth-century sources; firstly the aesthetics of landscape experience articulated by romantic art and poetry, and secondly the encyclopaedic, descriptive and yet also cosmological sense of landscape developed within emergent field sciences and natural history discourses, as exemplified by the work of Alexander von Humboldt^{xxi}.

Landscape also has an especially strong visual pedigree, of course, as a genre of Western art associated in particular with depictions of rural and natural scenery, and here again an interplay of cultural and natural forces is a defining hallmark of the concept. Landscape becomes the artistic frame through which evolving perceptions of nature – and, crucially, the very idea of nature as a domain external to human cultures – are pictured. This visual sense of landscape has at times been dominant within cultural geographers' own approach and understanding. In this section however, my focus will be upon an equally persistent and significant sense of landscape as the inhabited, storied and narrated earth^{xxii}. If landscape in this sense exemplifies 'earth writing', I want to argue that the stories it tells will need to be as much about not-belonging, about the distant and the estranged as they are about connection, immersion and belonging.

To elucidate this argument, I will open here with a discussion of what has without doubt been one of the most influential accounts of landscape and human inhabitation offered in recent years – the

work of one of the other contributors to this special issue, the anthropologist Tim Ingold. Across what is now an impressively extended and wide-ranging body of writing, Ingold consistently articulates an understanding of landscape and life that draws on phenomenology, strands of vital materialism and ecological psychology. Crucial to this understanding is an anti-dualist, indeed at times almost monist, perspective; one that views humans and land, culture and nature, mind and matter, as, from the start and forever, inextricably entangled and enmeshed together.

It is now twenty-five years since the first publication of Ingold's seminal essay, *The Temporality of the Landscape*^{xxiii}. While some of his language and concepts have notably changed and evolved since then, there is also, I think, a good degree of continuity of argument as well. Two points seem especially salient in terms of landscape and writing. Firstly, Ingold wants to emphasise the roots of writing in wider practices of mark-making and line-making. This serves to counter and query any inherited sense that 'writing' is an exclusive and cloistered cultural activity, taking place at one remove from the world, and critically reflecting upon it from that safe distance. Instead, writing is placed alongside not just speaking, drawing and storytelling as kindred forms, but also manifold quotidian world-sustaining and expressive practices such as walking, cooking and weaving. All such together constitute for Ingold the myriad ways in which life, human and non-human, is an ongoing matter of flows. The landscape is comprised of such flows – flows not only of air, light, bodies, rhythms and so on, but also flows of thought, narratives and writing. And so any earth writing 'is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter, but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated'.

Secondly and relatedly, Ingold's consistent emphasis is upon how expressivity and creativity are immanent within and always emergent from lived and worldly circumstances of ongoing engagement and exfoliation. The language of inscription and signification is rejected *tout court*: 'telling a story is not like weaving a tapestry to cover up the world . . . Far from dressing up a plain reality with layers of metaphor, or representing it, map-like, in the imagination, songs, stories and

designs serve to conduct the attention of performers into the world^{xxiv}. Equally, any earth writing 'is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter, but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated'^{xxv}.

At the end of *The Temporality of the Landscape* these arguments crystallise in a now well-known summative statement:

'The landscape, in short, is not a totality that you or anyone else can look at, it is rather the world in which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings. And it is within the context of this attentive involvement in the landscape that the human imagination gets to work in fashioning ideas about it. For the landscape, to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty, is not so much the object as 'the homeland of our thoughts'^{xxvi}.

These words, with their invocation of landscape as human homeland, find a companion echo, for me, in the title of another well-known account of humanity's relationship with the earth: Jonathon Bates's *The Song of the Earth*^{xxvii}. If the earth *is* the homeland of humanity; that is, if we endorse an essential and irrevocable belongingness of one to the other, then it follows that human expression, or 'earth writing', in speech, writing or indeed singing, must be understood the song of the earth itself. However, while both draw initially on phenomenological sources for this vision, where Bates' perhaps differs from Ingold is in presenting a narrative of disconnection and re-connection. He argues that 'language is itself a symptom of humankind's apartness', but yet despite this wishes to reserve a hopeful and maybe even utopic place for 'poetry as a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature'^{xxviii}. In some respects, this narrative echoes Ingold's tendency to present modern life as a set of misconceived and alienating resurfacings of the landscape, and to argue for recognition instead of the primacy of life lived amidst and along lifelines of matter, sensation, energy and action. But my wager would also be that Ingold would reject any argument that language or writing (or, for that matter, intelligence or technology) inaugurate an essential splitting of humanity and the landscapes of the non-human world, and thus would question also any sense that writing should redeem or renew in respect of our relations with landscape.

Placing Ingold's and Bate's work alongside each other further prompts the question, what might an Ingoldian creative landscape writing look like? One answer from within cultural geography would be to point to the work of Hayden Lorimer, whose bio-geographical approach combines a phenomenological and material attentiveness to the agency and cogency of non-human lifeforms and landscapes with evocative narratives of human experience and memory^{xxix}. More widely, however, I would look here to the now-large swathe of popular creative non-fiction writing dealing with themes of landscape, nature, experience, perception and identity that has emerged in the UK over the last fifteen-odd years – the work, among others, of writers such as Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane and Tim Robinson^{xxx}.

This diverse body of work is commonly glossed and packaged as the 'new nature writing'. However, I would nominate 'landscape writing' as a more accurate umbrella term, principally because of a consistent focus upon issues of connection, perception and recollection, as these play out dynamically between a subject physically and discursively on the move, and the terrains they traverse. In this genre, landscape indeed emerges as story, as both actor and stage in a distinctively narrative context, and often in a notably self-aware and reflexive fashion. It would thus be unfair to characterise work by prominent authors such as Macfarlane and Jamie as promoting a romanticised or atavistic sense of nature and landscape, because it is exactly the burden of that romantic inheritance that is being negotiated and problematised.

That said, it is also difficult to disagree with Neal Alexander's conclusion that this landscape writing remains in some respects a 'theology of the wild'; reliant upon the appeal of wondrous and spiritualised literary evocations of 'nature', even as these are questioned and bracketed^{xxxi}. In this sense, a sense of severance from landscape – a sundering of word and world, to re-use an earlier phrase - is aesthetically reprised and perhaps even rehabilitated in a kind of minor key. Apartness and loss may be foundational to writing about landscape *per se*, as Kate Rigby argues, drawing on Schiller^{xxxii}. In this new landscape writing such loss often re-appears framed through the familiar

idioms of elegy and melancholy, just as a sense of the difference and sublime indifference of non-human nature is equally calibrated through tropes of the enchanted and the eerie. New grounds for writing are discovered (estuaries, post-industrial edgelands), and the inadequacy of traditional frameworks of landscape aesthetics in the face of contemporary environmental change is acknowledged. But these kinds of works have found a contemporary readership, I would aver, because their quintessential function remains to console and to reveal. They have achieved prominence, I believe (and with Robert Macfarlane's work as exemplary here), chiefly because they offer readers access to epiphanic and revelatory writerly episodes. Moments where earth and experience seem to fuse and synchronise together.

The Plains #3

In the first section of *The Plains*, while the narrator awaits admittance to the inner sanctum of a bar where the landowning plainsmen are holding court, we learn about an old dispute regarding life on the plains. A dispute crystallising in two factions, the Horizonites and the Hareman. The names of these factions or groupings indicate two distinctive approaches to the landscape of the plains. On the one hand, the Horizonites, as the name implies, discerned the essence of the plains upon the far horizon. Thus 'what moved them more than wide grasslands and huge skies was the scant layer of haze where land and sky merged in the farthest distance...they esteemed the land of their birth for the very reason that it seemed bounded continually by the blue-green veil that urged them to dream of a different plain'^{xxxiii}. In contrast, the Hareman took their name from a now-extinct animal dwelling upon the plains, a hare-like creature whose hide was dull gold-coloured like much of the landscape of the plains, and which sought to camouflage itself by pressing itself into the ground and lying still (although this does not prevent its detection and clubbing). Through adopting this lugubrious motif, the Hareman sought 'to recover the promise, the mystery even, of the plains...they were pledged to find grand themes in the weathered gold of their birthplace'^{xxxiv}.

Murnane thus comments, and almost disdainfully it can seem, upon some of the central dilemmas and tensions of the landscape concept. Tensions for example between remaining and leaving, between the ground upon which one stands, and the dis-stance of the beckoning horizon. If landscape *is* the hidden tension between here and elsewhere, between locatedness and dislocation, then on the plains this tension is openly identified and discussed. *The Plains* relates the further disputes of the Horizonites and Haremen, and the culture of the plains-dwellers is thus pictured as one for whom the meaning, or the mystery, of its landscape is a central, recurring preoccupation. Eventually the plainsmen make it a custom to wear two rings, one of blue-green, one of dull gold, symbolising this predicament of ground and horizon, one within which they nevertheless seem content to abide.

4. Landscape as not-belonging

At this point, I arrive at the critical interpretative crux of this paper. I perceived above a thread stitching together three things: a general definition in cultural geography of landscape as the inhabited and storied earth, the vital-phenomenological account of landscape as lifeworld and homeland proposed by Tim Ingold, and the narratives of self and landscape entwined frequently offered within contemporary UK-based landscape writing. What I believe to be shared across these different domains is a strong commitment to the mutual entanglement of humans and the lands they inhabit, and to an ideal correspondence of self and landscape, such that the essential *belongingness* of humans to the earth is affirmed and re-affirmed. As earth-writing, landscape becomes expressive testimony to this belongingness.

This stress upon stories of belonging is especially visible in a tendency, common across both popular landscape writing and some forms of current creative geographies, to mitigate the worry that belonging might operate *via* exclusion and division, through seeking instead a more elevated and enlivened mode of encounter. The recurrence of the trope of *enchantment* is notable here. One of the earliest compendiums of recent landscape writing announces its titular *credo* in this regard fairly

explicitly: *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings*. Similarly, writing in the journal *Geohumanities*, Nicholas Bausch writes that ‘the geographer’s role is to breathe life into landscapes—not only to interpret, but to boldly give meaning, enchanting and creatively mythologizing the world’s surface’^{xxxv}. And most recently in the same journal, in an essay simply and boldly entitled ‘Earth Writing’, Simon Springer presents a strongly-voiced petition, arguing that ‘when we make space for earth writing as a beautiful flourishing of geopoetics, we place the earth at the centre of experience, releasing the light and energy of a more powerful geography’^{xxxvi}.

Yet I wish to swim against this current. To reprise the argument (and title) of another recent paper of mine, I believe that a landscape cannot be a homeland^{xxxvii}. The very idea of homeland is predicated upon exile, as Amy Kaplan notes in her analysis of the term^{xxxviii}. A homeland must therefore already sit at a distance, must be an index of separation and apartness, rather than a secured dwelling or inhabitation. And it is precisely because there are no such secure homelands available for us to inhabit that we cannot speak of ‘original inhabitants’, as I argued at the outset of this paper. We cannot invoke a golden moment of co-presence of humans and land. Instead, as Jean-Luc Nancy explicates, any being-with-landscape relies upon a certain critical distance. Any abolition of the originary distance between ourselves and land is in truth the eclipse of both us and land. Instead, landscape is a marker of how we are distanced from the world, separated from it as the very basis of our capacity to conceive and relate to it. The horizon-line of landscape is, Nancy argues, the presentation and distinctive outline of a spacing which ‘also marks the infinite separation and distance of that which is traced’^{xxxix}.

In a short essay in the collection *Landscape Theory*, an essay from which I have taken part of my title, the art critic and historian of photography Robin Kelsey seems to concur with these kind of arguments, when he states that landscape is a ‘space to define humanity as a species that does not belong’^{xl}. Kelsey, however, is advancing a critique of landscape as a mode of thinking, imagining and experiencing. In invoking not-belonging, he intends to characterise landscape as a typically modern

and western project of dividing and denying. This is a position that resonates with a famous remark by the critic Raymond Williams: ‘the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation’^{xli}. In this reading, landscape is a technique for setting the world at a distance from us, such that we can deny our involvement, our belonging. Or rather, such that we can on the one hand claim that we do not belong to the world, while on the other acting as if it belongs to *us* - the landscape is ours, our property. Kelsey thus argues that landscape – here implicitly figured as a mode of figuration or representation – is a key element of Western humanism’s denial of corporeality, of materiality, of animality. In this way, all landscape has a touch of fantasy, he notes. Specifically, landscape names the ‘fantasy of not belonging to the totality of life of a terrestrial expanse’^{xlii}.

Kelsey’s essay goes on to pinpoint some distinctive variants of this fantasy of not-belonging to the earth – a romantic variant, for instance, in which we long to belong, but nevertheless cannot, and a nostalgic or edenic variant, in which we suppose that, ‘once upon a time’ we did belong - but then came the fall. But I think that his sharpest insight in this essay is that we often pretend, or tell ourselves, that we want to belong, to re-connect with the world, with nature and so on. The truth, Kelsey argues, is that our real desire is most often to place ourselves at a distance, in an air-conditioned enclosure. We desire to not-belong to the world – and this is the desire we deny or suppress. For Kelsey, in the prevailing romantic landscape fantasy of Western cultures, ‘an ostensible longing to belong is integral to landscape ideology’^{xliii}. In other words, we pretend that belonging, connecting, dwelling, inhabiting is what we truly desire, and seek to approach in earth writing. But it isn’t.

The reason I have chosen to focus here on what is, in the end, a relatively short essay by Kelsey – one of a number of ‘assessments’ in the *Landscape Theory* volume – is that its arguments have helped me to clarify my own current thinking of landscape, both in agreement and disagreement. Of course it is the case that landscape, particularly visual landscape, has long been part of a distanced command and control system. Equally the role of landscape art in romanticising both the natural

world and certain modes of dwelling therein cannot be denied. But where Kelsey insists that that the not-belonging of landscape is an ideological fabrication, I would say, not only that. Can we argue as well that landscape names and defines not-belonging as a lived and existential condition?

It is difficult for Kelsey to approach this point, because his essay apprehends phenomenology chiefly in its most romantic, eco-phenomenological variant, as a kind of ethical and ecological quest for authentic re-connection with the world – with our bodies, with ‘nature’ and so on. Much of the *Landscape Theory* volume, in fact, pivots around a distinction between on the one hand, critical readings of aesthetic landscape ideologies, and on the other phenomenological accounts of landscape as a ‘positive’ or even enchanted lived experience of inhabitation. But I think that this distinction is rather stale and limiting. The phenomenology of landscape I have in mind is one more decisively marked by a recognition of unhomeliness and distancing as both a critical and affective condition. In other words, I would look to the phenomena of a dislocated world, of nothing that can in fact be called ‘a’ world, and to a fragmented subject not-coincident with itself. And this is *not* a gloss laid over a more homely or traditional phenomenology. In many ways the unhomely and the estranged are built into some of the founding arguments of phenomenology. As the cultural geographer Mitch Rose has recently highlighted afresh, Heidegger’s account of human existence views it as ‘primordially estranged from its world’ and thus the self ‘experiences an underlying anxiety that colours the world as distinctly Unheimlich, or unhomelike’^{xliv}. I would wish to question the word ‘primordial’, but I would concur that any phenomenological account of the earth and experience, of how selves and world relate and intertwine, would need to set out from the recognition that ‘earth’ and ‘experience’ are territories always already internally displaced, and thus never fully present to themselves or each other. The sense of landscape, I would argue, is a specific signal of this distance and dislocation. For every invocation of landscape as marker of belonging and identity, or of land and life vitally entwined, there is also always something out of reach, something we cannot dwell upon. Something intransigent, apart and indifferent in landscape that cannot be simply domesticated and encompassed through being rendered as sublime, or as spooky. When

Robin Kelsey speaks of landscape as not-belonging he does not go quite far enough. It is so not just ideologically, but also existentially and phenomenologically.

The Plains #4

What can a short Australian novel, first published back in 1982, have to tell us today about landscape, earth and writing? Near the end of *The Plains*, we are offered a notable example of the kind of ironic meta-commentary in which the text at times indulges. The narrator tells us that perhaps ‘the plains are not what many plainsmen take them for. They are not, that is, 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’^{xlv}.

Here, Murnane seems to push, almost to the point of parody, a reading of his own text as a tale about the impossibility of representing the earth. *The Plains* might seem at this point to epitomise a linguistic or textual idealism, focused on the endless ‘construction’ of metaphorical meaning, even as it lampoons it. This is Sue Gillett’s conclusion in her essay on the novel, and also Julian Murphy’s, when he concludes that *The Plains* offers ‘a dematerialised view of landscape in which it is purely the product of the human mind’^{xlvi}. But my own reading would see the text as exemplary of a certain kind of critical ‘earth writing’, insofar as it is a meditation upon the impossibilities of inhabitation.

The Plains’ Australian setting is relevant here. Much of the novel’s intrigue arises from its inversions of received images of the country. Rather than being a remote desert backwater or emptiness, the inland plains are here presented as the heart of Australia. They are pictured as a land of cultural sophistication – a sophistication essentially Australian – in contrast to the decadent coasts of Outer Australia. A stereotypical image of the inhabitants of inland Australia is inverted; here, ‘men of imagination rather than men of brawn are the real pioneers’^{xlvii}. And nowhere in the text is there any mention of indigenous Australian peoples. The entire narrative unfolds in what can seem a purified fantasy landscape. For Kate Foord, *The Plains* is thus a knowing, subversive commentary on the

colonial fantasy of an 'empty' Australian landscape, a *terra nullius* which legitimates the appropriation and occupation of the land^{xlviii}. It is a text where the very absence of indigenous peoples serves to highlight the unbridgeable distances between the plains and their dwellers, and thus the inescapable uncanniness, or unhomeliness, of their inhabitation^{xlix}.

The Plains is not an unproblematic text in terms of this absencing of non-colonial peoples, even if this works to underscore the impossibilities of an achieved correspondence between a landscape and its inhabitants. Equally the text to an extent relies for purchase upon a difficult form of gendering, in which speechless female figures often appear to passively stand as emblems of the landscape, while males gaze on for insight. Yet despite these difficulties, *The Plains* remains notable and distinctive precisely for its refusal to console or to reveal in respect of landscape, and for its insistence that earth and experience cannot be conjoined. Far from showing us as marooned within an exclusive realm of writing, *The Plains* is a kind of earth writing precisely because it acknowledges instead the distances that cleave between word and world, the distances that give us the very possibility of landscape.

ⁱ G Murnane *The Plains* Kalamazoo, Michigan, Western Michigan University Press, 2003, p.110

ⁱⁱ I am referring here in particular to the foundational work of Carl Sauer in the early decades of the twentieth century, and to the wider 'Berkeley School' of cultural geography that he led. An indicative selection of Sauer's writing can be found in: Carl O. Sauer, ed. John Leighly Land and Life: a selection from the writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer (Berkeley, CA. University of California Press, 1963)

ⁱⁱⁱ For an overview collection, see Martin Samuels & David Ley eds. *Humanistic geography: prospects and problems* (Chicago, IL: Maaroufa Press, 1978)

^{iv} Trevor Barnes & James Duncan eds. *Writing Worlds: discourse, text and metaphor in the representation of landscape*, (London, Routledge 1992), p.13

^v In addition to *Writing Worlds*, other key pioneer collections of the 'new cultural geography' include: Chris Philo, compiler, *New Words, New Worlds: Reconceptualising Social and Cultural Geography* (Lampeter, St Davids University College, 1991) and James Duncan and David Ley eds *Place/Culture/Representation* (London, Routledge, 1993)

^{vi} *Writing Worlds*, 25

^{vii} *Ibid*, 14-15

^{viii} Jacques Derrida 'Differance' in Jacques Derrida, trans. Alan Bass *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-29

^{ix} See, for example, Marcus Doel *Poststructuralist geographies: the diabolical art of spatial science*. (London, Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) Paul Harrison, 'The space between us: opening remarks on the concept of dwelling'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 4 (2007) 625-647. Jeff Popke 'Geography and ethics: spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility', *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, 4 (2007) 509-518. Clive

Barnett 'Ways of relating: hospitality and the acknowledgement of otherness'. *Progress in human geography*, 29 1 (2005) 5-21.

* The literature around new materialism is already extensive. A key intervention within geography is Sarah Whatmore 'Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world' *cultural geographies*, 13, 4 (2006) 600-609. Some of the wider works most influential within human geography include Karen Barad *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007) Jane Bennett *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*, (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2009) Donna Haraway *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN University of Minnesota Press 2008)

^{xi} See Claire Colebrook, 'Not symbiosis, not now: Why anthropogenic change is not really human' *Oxford Literary Review*, 34, 2 (2012) 185-209

^{xii} Quentin Meillassoux, trans, Ray Brassier *After Finitude: an essay on the necessity of contingency* (London, Bloomsbury, 2009)

^{xiii} For an in-depth discussion of the arguments being presented here, see Harriet Hawkins *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (London, Routledge, 2013)

^{xiv} An illustrative but by no means exhaustive selection of recent work operating within a creative geographies framework would include: Janet Banfield 'Knowing between: generating boundary understanding through discordant situations in geographic-artistic research' *cultural geographies* 23,3, (2016) 459 - 473, Tim Cresswell 'Geographies of poetry/poetries of geography', *cultural geographies*, 21, 1 (2014) 141-146, Caitlin DeSilvey 'Salvage memory: constellating material histories on a hardscrabble homestead', *cultural geographies*, 14, 3, (2007) 401-424, Michael Gallagher 'Sounding ruins: reflections on the production of an 'audio drift'. *cultural geographies*, 22, 3 (2015) 467-485, Leah Gibbs, L 'Arts-science collaboration, embodied research methods, and the politics of belonging: 'SiteWorks' and the Shoalhaven River, Australia'. *cultural geographies*, 21, 2, (2014) 207-227, Owain Jones "Not Promising a Landfall...": An Autotopographical Account of Loss of Place, Memory and Landscape. *Environmental Humanities*, 6, 1, (2015) 1-27, Hayden Lorimer & John Wylie 'LOOP (a geography)', *Performance Research*, 15, 4, (2010) 6-13. Alex Miller 'Creative geographies of ceramic artists: knowledges and experiences of landscape, practices of art and skill'. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18, 2 (2017) 1-23.

^{xv} See for example Caitlin De Silvey *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Fraser MacDonald 'The Ruins of Erskine Beveridge'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39, 4, (2014) 477-489. John Wylie 'Vanishing Points: an essay on landscape, memory and belonging' *Irish Geography*, 50, 1, (2017) 3-18.

^{xvi} *The Plains*, p.13

^{xvii} *Ibid*, p.111

^{xviii} For example, Sue Gillett 'Gerald Mumane's "The Plains": A Convenient Source of Metaphors'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26, 2. (1995) 25-39

^{xix} Jean-Luc Nancy 'Uncanny Landscape' in *The Ground of the Image*, (New York NY, Fordham University Press, 2005), 53

^{xx} Denis Cosgrove 'Landscapes and myths, gods and humans', in Barbara Bender ed *Landscape, Politics and Perspectives*, (Oxford, Berg, 1993) 281-305

^{xxi} Chenxi Tang *The Geographical Imagination of Modernity: Geography, Literature, and Philosophy in German Romanticism*, (Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press, 2008)

^{xxii} The most notable recent geographical discussion of this idea of landscape can be found in Stephen Daniels and Hayden Lorimer 'Until the end of days: narrating landscape and environment'. *cultural geographies*, 19, 1 (2012) 3-9.

^{xxiii} Tim Ingold 'The temporality of the Landscape'. *World archaeology*, 25, 2 (1993) 152-174.

^{xxiv} Tim Ingold *The Perception of the Environment* (London, Routledge, 2001), p.56

^{xxv} Tim Ingold 'The textility of making'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34 1 (2010) 91-102., p.92

^{xxvi} Ingold *Temporality*, p.173

^{xxvii} Jonathon Bate *The Song of the Earth*. (London & New York, Pan Macmillan, 2001).

^{xxviii} *Song of the Earth*, p.145, p.245

^{xxix} Some key examples here would include: Hayden Lorimer "Telling small stories: spaces of knowledge and the practice of geography." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, 2 (2003): 197-217, Hayden Lorimer "Herding memories of humans and animals." *Environment and planning D: society and space* 24, 4 (2006): 497-518. Hayden Lorimer "Homeland." *cultural geographies* 21, 4 (2014): 583-604.

^{xxx} See Robert Macfarlane *The Old Ways: A journey on foot*. (London, Penguin, 2012), Robert Macfarlane *The Wild Places*. (London, Penguin, 2007), Kathleen Jamie *Sightlines* (London, Sort Of Books, 2012) Kathleen Jamie *Findings* (London, Sort Of Books, 2005), Tim Robinson *Connemara: listening to the wind*. (London, Penguin, 2007, Tim Robinson *Connemara: the last pool of darkness*. (London, Penguin 2008), Tim Robinson *Connemara: a little Gaelic kingdom*. (London, Penguin 2011).

Book-length studies of these and other mainly UK-based writers are now beginning to appear. See for example Daniel Weston *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience*. (Farnham, Ashgate, 2016) and Jos Smith *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2017)

^{xxxi} Neal Alexander 'Theologies of the Wild: Contemporary Landscape Writing'. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38, 4 1-19.

^{xxxii} Kate Rigby 'Writing after nature' *Australian Humanities Review*, issue 39-40,(2006) no pagination

^{xxxiii} *The Plains*, p.27

^{xxxiv} *ibid*

^{xxxv} Nicolas Bauch 'A scapeloire manifesto: Creative geographical practice in a mythless age'. *GeoHumanities*, 1, 1 (2015) 103-123.

^{xxxvi} Simon Springer 'Earth writing'. *GeoHumanities*, 3, 1, (2017) 1-19.

^{xxxvii} John Wylie 'A landscape cannot be a homeland'. *Landscape Research*, 41, 4 (2016) 408-416.

^{xxxviii} Amy Kaplan "Homeland insecurities: reflections on language and space." *Radical History Review* 2003, no. 85 (2003): 82-93.

^{xxxix} Nancy – uncanny landscape

^{xl} Robin Kelsey 'Landscape as not belonging', in Rachel De Lue and James Elkins, eds *Landscape Theory* (London, Routledge, 2008) 203-213, 207

^{xli} Raymond Williams *The Country and The City* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1973), 120

^{xlii} Kelsey, *Landscape as not belonging*, p.204

^{xliii} *Ibid*, p.209

^{xliv} Mitch Rose "Dwelling as marking and claiming." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, 5 (2012): 757-771, 762

^{xlv} *The Plains*, p.91

^{xlvi} Julian Murphy 'Reading landscape in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*' *Exegesis* (2013) 2, 4-13

^{xlvii} Sue Gillett 'Gerald Murnane's "The Plains": A Convenient Source of Metaphors'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26, 2. (1995) 25-39.

^{xlviii} Kate Foord 'The figure of woman and the fantasy of the modern Australian nation: travelling to the 'Empty Centre'. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 18, 42, (2003) pp.273-283.

^{xlix} For a fuller discussion of this, see Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and identity in a postcolonial nation*. (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1998).