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Behind the Appearances: Spaces and Places in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982)

Abstract. Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982) depicts a world in which the landscape governs both the characters' and the readers' perceptions. Analyzing the novel's duplicities and peculiarities, as well as the author's individual approach to fiction writing, the article identifies sources for the plains' uniqueness. Murnane's language, along with the writing process, is a bearer of the quality termed uncanniness which shapes the (un)reality of *The Plains* by employing contrasts and evoking the feeling of un/familiarity in the reader. Following the trope of in-betweenness, the article views the novel through the prism of liminality, treating its various components as sites of transformation. As the further analysis of both the spaces/places of the novel and the protagonist-narrator's personal experience illustrates, the plains subvert this seemingly linear process of transformation and, opposing their occupants' attempts to gain control, prove their own existence as the influential, yet elusive, force on the novel's reality. In essence, the article aims to explore Murnane's portrayal of this idiosyncratic landscape, probing the applicability of capturing or defining the plains, be it by the protagonist's camera and senses or our theoretical tools.

Keywords: *The Plains*, Gerald Murnane, liminality, the uncanny, spaces and places

1. Exploring *The Plains*

"No two mountain peaks are alike, but anywhere on earth the plains are one and the same," wrote Jorge Luis Borges, an inspiration for Gerald Murnane (460). Those very words, however, do not correspond with landscapes created by the Australian writer whose way of shaping the fictional worlds separates him from the rest of fiction writers especially concerned with the landscapes in their works. *The Plains* (1982) is Murnane's most famous novel, which on the one hand follows the author's previous creations—*Tamarisk Row* and *A Lifetime on Clouds*—and their

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preoccupation with one's existence in the idiosyncratic Australian landscape[2]; on the other, it marks Murnane's moment of attaining authorial maturity and crystallization of style, and defines his signature themes. Like all of Murnane's early literary efforts, the book in its present form—*The Plains* stems from a longer, unpublished work *The Only Adam*—is a compromise made for the sake of marketability, and does not fully reflect his intentions. It was not until *Barley Patch* (2009) that Murnane could write his fiction under no restrictions. On the bright side, the publication of *The Plains* proved to be a catalyst for the audience's and scholars' rising interest in Murnane's original writing. Curiously, he regards *The Plains* as one of his minor works.

The Plains tells a simple story of a filmmaker, who twenty years before had arrived on the plains to capture on film the distinctive culture of the peculiar landowning families. In the first paragraph of the book the narrator recalls, "I looked for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances" (Murnane, *The Plains* 1). Surrounded by the seemingly endless and impenetrable landscape, the filmmaker sets out to collect material for the script for his film, *The Interior*. Talking and interacting with the mysterious plainsmen, he explores the history and habits of the nameless persons, who take pride in their individuality and withdrawal from the rest of the country. The community the filmmaker engages with is tight-knit, hardly approachable, almost homogenized—it is hard to differentiate one landowner from the other—but in conflict at the same time; they are divided into the Haremen and the Horizonites. All this creates an aura of unwelcomeness as if they were disturbed and endangered by the protagonist-narrator's presence. The element of paradox, or double-sidedness in *The Plains*, is omnipresent and appears both through the filmmaker's impossible aim to expose through creative undertaking the 'real' nature of the place he resides in and through the ambiguous, unidentifiable qualities that place contains. The sentences of *The Plains* emanate with ambivalence, multiplicity of options, and secrecy, for instance "exploring two landscapes—one continually visible but never accessible and the other always invisible even though one crossed and recrossed it daily" (45). The two landscapes, or rather two possibilities presented at the same time, along with the cultural side of the filmmaker's surroundings, are explored by him from a distance created by those landscapes. The distance is manifest regarding the structure and the narrative of the novel, concerned with interactions with plainsmen, the aforementioned exploration of the environment, but also, as the story progresses, the relationship between the filmmaker and the daughter of his patron. All the time the protagonist-narrator is distanced, on the margin, outside looking in—or trying to look in. Appointing a dominant plane of events out of the aforementioned three would prove futile since *The Plains* is devoid of an expendable word or sentence, and so of the thematical and structural contents as well. Regarding the structure, Harriet L. McInerney observes that it is

2 Calling Murnane's works' setting "the Australian landscape" is a simplification for the sake of clearness of expression. As will become evident later, the matter is vaguer.

> difficult to locate. The three parts that make up *The Plains* could suggest a traditional three-act structure. However, in reality, the majority of the action occurs in part 1, compared to the shorter and more self-reflective parts 2 and 3. In this way, the focus of the novel textually shifts from the exterior of the plainsmen to the unknown interior of the filmmaker. (139)

Not only does Murnane subvert the reader's expectations regarding the depiction of a particular place and its inhabitants on the stratum of the text, but he also overturns the structural pattern, unevenly distributing the amount of portrayed events and changing their dimension—from the outsider's point of view recalling the initial shock upon getting in contact with the plains in the first part, to that of the inquisitive researcher in the second part, to the confused, disillusioned—once again—outsider's point of view in the third part. What is crucial here is the ever-present binary of inside–outside, regardless of the depicted events and narrative focus.

The Plains proves categorizational difficulty by balancing on the border of reality and unreality, by evoking a sense of existing outside of the familiarity of novelistic setting and characterization, and by a certain self-containment. Additionally, self-reflexivity, pertaining to Murnane's oeuvre, offers additional insight into this particular title. Murnane, however, warned the audience not to approach his writing with a false conviction that he had in mind a "step-by-step program" (Giramondo Publishing). The similarities, echoes, stylistic development, or thematic preoccupations are nevertheless impossible to ignore. For example, the first paragraph of *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," appears to be transformed into the first paragraph in *Border Districts*,

> Two months ago, when I first arrived in this township just short of the border, I resolved to guard my eyes, and I could not think of going on with this piece of writing unless I were to explain how I came by that odd expression. (3)

Murnane's characteristic tendency to juxtapose opposites is visible right away—the placement of action in time is the joint element, but while in the former book the temporal distance is great, in the latter it is the opposite. Then, the phrase "when I first arrived" is repeated, which, through the synecdochical treatment of *Border Districts*, exemplifies Murnane's use of themes of arrival in a strange place—or rather, a strange space, since, following Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction, it has not yet been endowed with value—and the protagonists-narrators' attempts to comprehend and find their footing in a new situation. Later in the paragraphs the settings differ, but the actions related to perceiving the new surroundings again link the two books together. This time, the former curiosity, determination, and the aim of revealing the hidden are superseded by the latter's protection, unexplained action, and inability to pursue the intended task. Through opposites, the connection is established. Then again, toward the end of both paragraphs, although the initial reactions differ, the artistic undertaking binds the two together—the protagonist-narrator

of *The Plains* is a filmmaker, and the protagonist-narrator of *Border Districts* expresses his intention to continue writing. More instances of similar textual correspondence can be found in the writer's oeuvre, but the major takeaway here is that "[t]he metafictional and theoretical undercurrent which characterizes many of Murnane's books, especially from *The Plains* onward … offers a valuable insight into [his] philosophical beliefs and his idea of fiction" (Bartoloni 41). That theoretical undercurrent, however, needs to be considered with caution, for, as Murnane wrote in 2007, the literary theory he had been taught never fully convinced him; rather, he felt it unrelated to his own experience as a reader, let alone a would-be writer of fiction (*Tamarisk Row* 7). As the quote above emphasizes, *The Plains* not only marks Murnane's technical abilities entering a more advanced phase but also capably illustrates his intent and personal convictions regarding fiction's potential.

In an interview conducted not long after the publication of *The Plains*, Murnane answered a question regarding his focus on consciousness rather than actions outside of one's mind, on emotions rather than speech, with the words,

> If you want characters with names and quoted speech, then, presumably, you want to believe that fiction is an imitation of what you call the real world. You had better go and sit in front of your television set. My fiction is a report of the contents of my mind. I don't try to convince my readers that my writing shows them the real world, whatever that is. My books are set in the landscapes of my mind. (Braun-Bau and Murnane 45)

Moreover, Murnane perceives human relationships and his mind as landscapes, "a composite of all the places I've been—and other places, of course" (46). Throughout his books, *The Plains* especially, he traverses between the self and the other, and it may be said that his main character undergoes a process of reverse-illumination (not obscuration), since in the last scene of the book his final gesture is pointing a camera at his own eye, and thus, as Murnane claimed,

> *The Plains* is about seeing. The narrator is trying to learn what it actually is to see. If you're looking for meaning, go to the last pages of the book. The drunken plainsman argues that everything is becoming invisible, even while we're looking at it or, rather *because* we're looking at it. I thought while I was writing that passage "If you look into an eye, you see only darkness." And yet, as the plainsman says, that's where the visible world is. We think our minds are brightly lit, but I know they're in darkness. (46)

Upon finishing *The Plains* and experiencing its protagonist-narrator's gesture suggesting either defeat or reconciliation with his inability to discover what exists behind the appearances of the landscape, the protagonist's and the narrative's lack of typical transformation displays Murnane's individualistic philosophy—joining literary landscapes with the author's inner life and convictions about the novel's possibilities. Such a reading of *The Plains* corresponds with

the writer's proneness to use the one to turn attention to the other. The work of fiction is his means and ends to achieve so.

Considering various aims, journeys, and ideals of Murnane's characters, his writerly approach becomes apparent. The characters' individualism and occasional inaction under their objectives create still more oppositional 'two-sidednesses'—despite the in-text narrative movement of those characters and the vastness of the created worlds, the protagonists' outcomes are unsuccessful; simultaneously, they unveil different, unexpected outcomes, neither one nor the other, which, as showcased above, is exactly the case of *The Plains* and its final scene. In this respect, Murnane—or, in any case, his book(s)—presents himself as an idealist who is "not tethered to a reductive idea of things as they are" (Birns 160–161). His writings are a reflection of his own mental landscapes and not merely imagined worlds of fiction. J. M. Coetzee even called him "a radical idealist," whose "fictional personages or 'image-persons' … have their existence in a world much like the world of myth, purer, simpler, and more real than the world in which their mundane avatars are born, live, and die" (268). On the surface, *The Plains* is a simple tale, which nevertheless contains a multitude of surprising solutions, idiosyncrasies, and inimitable urgency in reflecting the nature of the world as existing in one's mind. In a word, *The Plains* is an "anti-Australian novel" (Osborne 53), which, to borrow Murnane's own recent words from *Last Letter to a Reader*, "was written for the purest of all motives – it was written because it *had* to be written" (37).

2. The Uncanny Quality of Murnane's Writing

Murnane's writing is unique, yet his technicality, precision, choice of words, certain tendencies and obsessions, would place his writerly sensitivity next to Borges and his labyrinthine syntax; Hardy and his sentimentality; Proust and his preoccupation with the temporal dimension of language. But besides the many associations, evocations, and categories one might attribute to Murnane's style, it is the act of writing the text that offers valuable insight. This insight into what happens behind the scenes is significant not only because of the effect the writer's words might have on the reader or of their receptiveness to theoretical interpretation, but because the very act of writing adds to the final product an important layer of the personal, illuminating the author's works still more strongly.

The language Murnane operates with shows a tendency to evoke the qualities pertaining to the concept of the uncanny first analyzed in relation to fiction by Ernst Jentsch, who wrote that "the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of [the reader's] attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away" (13). Had it been purposeful on the Australian's part, it could be said that this is Murnane's strategy of writing. Nevertheless, the disorientation caused by "a correlation 'new/foreign/hostile' [that] corresponds to the psychical association of 'old/known/familiar'" is inherent in Murnane's use of language and the effects it has on the reader (9). The identification and exploration of this uncanny quality of Murnane's writing will allow for a better understanding of his individual, intricate representation of the real/the fictional (non-)Australian landscape.

Murnane writes using a typewriter from the 1960s, clicking keys one at a time, which allows him to match the speed with which his thoughts formulate and to accurately process them onto the paper. The conditions of his surroundings—the lack of distracting items, closed curtains, lamplight turned on during the day—allow him to feel "enclosed from the world, removed from the world for the time being" ("The Writing Room" 00:01:06–09). Those elements, being not solely bits of trivia, are points of departure regarding Murnane's authorial distinctness. His mental removal from the real world and simultaneous elevation of focus result in the metaphorical relocation into *Another World in This One* (Uhlmann). That relocation, put less enigmatically, means simply a moment of writing, the author's state—somewhere between the everyday reality and the fictional realm of imagination. In his article, Paolo Bartoloni calls it "an interpretation of the act of writing as that process in-between reality and a further dimension" (40). This "another world" is thus a channel through which the language of the author moves to crystalize on the page.

While writing, Murnane disturbs that process by reading the sentences aloud. This, in turn, accentuates the significance the language bears for the writer. In the article "Why I Write What I Write," he meticulously explained,

> I write sentences. I write first one sentence, then another sentence. I write sentence after sentence. I write a hundred or more sentences each week and a few thousand sentences a year. After I've written each sentence, I read it aloud. I listen to the sound of the sentence, and I don't begin to write the next sentence unless I'm absolutely satisfied with the sound of the sentence I'm listening to.

Even in this short passage repetitions disorientate us but eventually convey the author's intention as precisely as possible, and so the language itself obtains the double-sidedness present throughout Murnane's fiction. As is the case with the elements concerned with the content of *The Plains*, the author's choice of words results in binarity in the book as well, since one element turns attention to the other. Sometimes it is the lack that conveys the message. For example, as McInerney observes regarding the plainsmen in the book, "The ulterior reality appears to draw on both the landscape of central Australia and national cultural anxieties to create the society and belief system of the plainsmen. However, nothing is spelled out clearly" (137). Thus, both the presence and the absence, the highlighted and the obscured are equally significant on the language level. Murnane's intention when shaping sentences and deciding on their purpose appears ambiguous as well; in between one and the other, between the precision of the message and the understatement. The sound of the sentences allows Murnane to exteriorize the authority he seeks in his creative effort and to recognize his authorial voice. But the very reason for the appearance of his words, as he accounts, is their haunting on his inside, "My sentences arise out of images and feelings that haunt me—not always painfully; sometimes quite pleasantly" (Murnane, "Why I Write What I Write").

The Plains' aforementioned multivocal instances of dependence on the one to underline the other and to highlight the invisible using the visible present a recurring pattern. An example of

such idiosyncrasy would be, "And her face was not quite so untroubled as I had hoped so that I had to visualize some of the compelling close-ups anew in the final scenes of my film" (Murnane, *The Plains* 90). The sentence, although inconspicuous and grammatically uncomplicated, contains a deeper layer. The protagonist-narrator here refers to his patron's daughter, who in the later part of the novel becomes his object of interest. The very description of her face, an act of conveying important information, is done not simply by the attribution of a certain expression to it so that it would read affirmative 'her face was troubled,' but instead by slightly confusing negation, "not … untroubled." In this way, the main clause of the sentence obtains the uncanny quality, which may be understood as "finding its strangeness by hovering between the known and the unknown or what is ordinary and what is not" (McInerney 134). Then, the face in question is neither one nor the other, it is somewhere in between troubled and untroubled expression. Additionally, "as I had hoped" further complicates the imaginary positioning of the sentence between the one and the other, since the description of the woman's face turns out to be not a report of her expression right there and then, but a failed expectation of the protagonist-narrator. Thus, what the sentence conveys is neither an actual facial expression nor is it simply a figment of the filmmaker's imagination since, in the scene, she physically sits in front of him—it is an uncanny description of what it is not in relation to his failed expectation.

Another example illustrating Murnane's tendency to use words in an unexpected way reads, "Odd to think that of all the plainsfolk lying asleep … not one has seen the view of the plains that I am soon to disclose" (*The Plains* 5–6). In the passage, at that point of the novel's development, the protagonist-narrator is unaware of the failure of his artistic venture that is to become manifest throughout the last pages. In the first part of the sentence, one of the most common words in the English language "all" is supplemented with the banal "lying asleep." However, it is not the obscurity of the language that constitutes Murnane's writerly power, but the meaning behind juxtaposing and connecting certain words instead of others that require closer analysis. Following the established pattern, the subject "all the plainsfolk" means presence, inclusivity, unity regarding a certain group of people, while the state they find themselves in evokes opposite associations. "Lying asleep" suggests disconnection and absence, and thus the relation between those two phrases effects in combining words of oppositional nature. Moreover, the words "of all the plainsmen lying asleep" read together ultimately present a vision either of total isolation or of the protagonist-narrator's exceptionality. Now, the latter part of the sentence is marked with yet another conundrum. The plainsfolk appear to have not seen (previously somehow hidden?) part of the plains which only the protagonist-narrator is able to reveal. In this way, the "lying asleep" of the inhabitants might be understood not only as a neurobiological condition but also in terms of ignorance or inability to see that which for them is supposed to be constantly visible. Eventually, both understandings can coexist. In effect, it appears, as Murnane accounted, "that the subject matter, the potential subject matter of what I am writing about is almost infinite," which again points to the uncanny sphere of un/familiarity, this time found in the unboundedness of meaning in which Murnane operates linguistically (Indyk).

Murnane clashes the known with the unknown in yet another sentence, focused on the protagonist-narrator's idea of the intended reception of his film-in-progress—"I had sometimes thought of *The Interior* as a few scenes from a much longer film that could only be seen from a vantage point that I knew nothing of" (*The Plains* 86). The mention of the film immediately turns attention to its content which is actually unknown both to the filmmaker and to the reader. There is only an intention or an effort to capture the plainsmen's reality. Now, as the sentence suggests, if *The Interior* took its final shape of only a few scenes as a part of a bigger whole, then its contents would be known to the filmmaker, while the rest would remain unknown. The "much bigger film" the reader knows nothing about creates infinite room for imagination—the filmmaker's artistic effort thereby oscillates between completion and never-ending possibility. Moreover, the subordinate clause "that could only be seen from a vantage point that I knew nothing of" comprises a precise condition under which *The Interior* could be seen, which is immediately followed by information about the filmmaker's obliviousness, and thus his inability to enact that very scenario (86). The "vantage point" is a choice of words that does not appear accidental since it represents two different meanings. It first relates to a personal, particular way of thinking about a given issue—the definition that overlaps with the filmmaker's position as an outsider, inherently unable to see the film—and the plains' 'real' nature—in the same way that, most likely, inhabitants of the plains would see it. The second meaning of the "vantage point" relates to a place that allows for clear observation of one's area. This corresponds with Murnane's preoccupation with and employment of the surroundings in *The Plains* in a way that the filmmaker, in order to 'properly see' the film, would have to find himself in a specific physical place, which never happens. On those grounds, the latter interpretation is less convincing, but it stresses the metaphorical plane of the novel and its uncanny use of language still more. In the above-mentioned possibilities and the double-meaning found in the analyzed sentence lies Murnane's ability to use the English language in a truly individual way.

The analyzed examples illustrate the Australian author's linguistic distinctness. Linking together relatively simple words and phrases, he manages to create double meanings, contrasts, and hidden layers which add up to a broader quality termed uncanniness. The ordinary and the unordinary, and the familiar and the unfamiliar, mingle and shape the uncertain, eerie, disorienting (un)reality of and in *The Plains*.

3. Liminality of *The Plains*

Liminality is a concept first introduced by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in *Rites de Passage* and later elaborated on by Victor Turner, which focused on the middle stage of rites of passage among certain small-scale communities. Van Gennep stressed the universality of the concept, merely detecting a pattern observable in different cases of his studies. As the author of the article *The Uses and Meanings of Liminality* corroborates, "all societies use rites to demarcate transitions" (Thomassen 6). With time, liminality proved its interpretative potential not only in anthropological or sociological contexts, but in a wider array of studies as well, and

began being employed interdisciplinarily. Van Gennep differentiated three periods present in a period of transition. 'Preliminal' signifies breaking from one's past self; 'liminal' relates to the actual passing through the threshold and to the changes in the initiate's identity caused by it; 'postliminal' marks the entering back into one's former environment but as a new, changed entity. Additionally, four categories of rites of passage were suggested, regarding people, places, situations, and time.

The structural and categorizational divisions outlined above—especially in view of *The Plains*—allow for a clear definition presented in *Landscapes of Liminality*,

> "Liminality" describes a state or location that is transitional, subjective, ambivalent, unstable, and marginal and that opens up new possibilities in a binary system; liminal phenomena occupy "middle-way" positions between two states or locations by being—paradoxically—neither or both of them at the same time. (Downey et al. 31)

The abolition of the binary division, along with the possibility of embracing neither or both impressions created by a given sign (e.g. words), produces an effect similar to that of the uncanny quality scrutinized earlier. But while the uncanniness of Murnane's writing educed an effect of confusion, puzzlement, or an inability to pinpoint the dominant message, and the focus of the analysis was particularly on language, the concept of liminality does not necessarily entail effects that might be deemed 'negative'; it relates to a certain process that Murnane's novel contains in various shapes. Similarities between the two, however, are inevitable due to some of their overlapping characteristics. Thus, the environment in *The Plains* could be analyzed in terms of uncanniness, but it is the concept of liminality that allows for a more revealing analysis.

Liminality's manifestations can be found in one of the earliest journeys in the world of literature, that of Odysseus. "[A]n entire series of trials and testing, including separation, shipwreck, and encounters with monsters … until the hero's eventual return" were identified as unaccidental concerning the history of the written word (Horvath et al. 79). It is thus not surprising that contemporary literature, perhaps even in a more pronounced manner, still exudes the same—but developed—sensibilities. By way of creative development, liminality in recent fiction is not limited only to a template of the hero's journey but can branch out to all components of a given work of fiction. Through this dispersion of the liminal characteristic and its very 'open' nature, contemporary literature possesses suitable means for the representation and examination of our inner lives. As Van den Bossche and Wennerscheid wrote

> Contemporary literature makes for a particularly good testing ground to study these dynamics because its aim is not to prove a fictional character's way of life right or wrong but to present his or her emotional ambivalences concomitant with the experience of transformation and transition. (Van den Bossche and Wennerscheid 2)

Then, the employment of the concept of liminality in a given work of fiction, and the interpretation of that work through that concept, are closer to an impartial observation of a natural phenomenon than to a concrete underlying structure. This approach applies to *The Plains* which, through various manifestations of the concept, presents a world that appears part-real and part-fictional. There is, however, an important fact to bear in mind—although in the book there are multiple instances of liminality's emergence, *The Plains*—by liminality's definition and Murnane's rejection of theory-based creation—does not programmatically adhere to this or any other theoretical framework.

Considering *The Plains* from a distance, the concept of liminality appears applicable. Since "liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes," parallels between each aforementioned element and the book can be drawn (Horvath et al. 2). Dislocation happens through the general portrayal of a place called Australia which Murnane presents in the novel. Ian Adam notes that "the novel systematically challenges our notion of 'Australia,'" and after a thorough dissection of different possible interpretations of the place—involving its geographical and political subclassifications, conceptual and symbolic distinction—points to the fact that in the novel Murnane, out of those differing definitions, creates a version of Australia "with a large division between what is to be known at [sic] 'Outer Australia' and 'The Plains'" (25). Moreover, the protagonist-narrator "journeys to the interior from an area called Australia until he reaches a region which is no longer Australia" (25). Thus, the dislocation occurs through the author's purposeful rejection of a faithful reflection of the place of the events, and through substituting it with 'familiarly unfamiliar' space that simultaneously resembles and reconstructs Australia. The second element, the reversal of hierarchies, is visible in the character of the protagonist-narrator who—not colonially invading the landscape—comes to the plains dedicated to preserving the distinctive culture of the inhabitants; his character is closer to being an observer than an invader. Then, not hostility per se, but unreceptiveness and progressive disappointment mark his relationship with the plainsmen and their land. But the tension, at times, can be detected—in one scene, as the filmmaker awaits the coming of wealthy landowners into the bar in hopes of finding a patron, he states—"I tried not to look agitated, and I watched my companions closely" (Murnane, *The Plains* 13). Later, once he manages to find a patron and is allowed to move through his estate, he narrates—"My patron, the girl's father, required me to drink with him for an hour or two on the verandah after dinner every evening" (91). Those two examples illustrate, to the narrator's detriment, the slightly uneven power relation. Being an outsider places the narrator, inversely to the usual pattern, in a position of less power and control than the plainsmen hold. The third element constituting the concept of liminality, that of unpredictable future and outcomes, is visible in the whole artistic endeavor of the filmmaker but also in the plainsmen's concern with preserving their lifestyle and traditions. Throughout the majority of *The Plains*, only the filmmaker's intention is known, but it is constantly postponed by distracting marginalia and the

place's resonance. At one point he says, "They would learn the truth when *The Interior* appeared as a film" (10). But the whole issue remains in the realm of possibility and indefiniteness until the novel's quasi-denouement. Paul Genoni writes in his article about the narrator digressing into the complexities of his surroundings—"He has been defeated by a conundrum; the more he contemplates the place referred to as the plains, the more he wonders if they exist at all in the usual physical sense" (138). Defeated, influenced by his patron's fascination with the concept of Time[3], he concludes that it "cannot be used for the production of a unified vision of space," which is, paradoxically, exactly what plainsmen strive for (138). Thus, it is not only the space he tries to capture through his camera and his senses that disallows him to complete his quest, but also the passage of time. Attributing to it the concept of liminality, all the events in the novel in the 20-year span, along with the place's very nature, appear as a continuous moment of transition in which the narrator disintegrates rather than obtains a new identity.

The statement that "[l]iminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and 'reality' itself, can be carried in different directions" corresponds with *The Plains*' elusiveness when it comes to their clear definition (Thomassen 5). The vision of the landscape proposed by Murnane is unstable, never fully graspable. At one point, after telling the plainsmen an eventless story, the filmmaker reports that "[the plainsmen] supposed that the artists who presented such things had been beguiled by the noises of crowds or the profusions of shapes and surfaces in the foreshortened landscapes of the world beyond the plains" (Murnane, *The Plains* 11). The plains that they see are established as a point of reference and orientation, which results in the novel's "tropes of disintegration, in which external place affects the interior of the subject" (Stockton 51). This process can be referred to the filmmaker's disintegration analyzed above and to the equally affected plainsmen. Certain passages exemplify the evolution of their sensibilities and the indubitable influence the landscape has (had) on them, for example, the one relating prior explorations into the inland:

> There were historians who suggested that the phenomenon of the plains themselves was responsible for the cultural differences between the plainsmen and Australians generally. … What had at first seemed utterly flat and featureless eventually disclosed countless subtle variations of landscape and an abundance of furtive wildlife. Trying to appreciate and describe their discoveries, the plainsmen had become unusually observant, discriminating, and receptive to gradual revelations of meaning. Later generations responded to life and art as their forebears had confronted the miles of grassland receding into haze. They saw the world itself as one more in an endless series of plains. (Murnane, *The Plains* 12)

3 This influence can also be seen in terms of power relations and thus refer back to that second element of liminality regarding hierarchical inversion—here, the patron serves as a cause for the narrator's doubt.

Firstly, the land's transitional aspect is visible—the former "flat and featureless" terrain with time revealed its richness. Subsequently, through exposure to the landscape's qualities, the plainsmen and their vantage point changed. But the post-liminal period resulted in alienation, instead of assimilation. The disclosure of the plains' meanings proved insufficient, which is why they started employing artists in order to expose one definite meaning, and under the landscape's influence they developed an obsession with the subject, the phenomenon possibly responsible for bringing out the differences between them and other Australians. Especially telling here is the unusual observance of the plainsmen, for it signifies another paradox found in the novel—it is, in fact, futile, since the plains appear as "miles of grassland receding into haze," eventually defying definition and allowing limited explanation. "The disintegration of bodily and spatial coherence through the disruption of visuality [which are] particularly apparent within *The Plains*" refers both to the example above and the previous analysis of the patron's daughter's facial expression (Stockton 127). Those instances emphasize not only the suspension in the liminal space of the plains but also underline the susceptibility to their influence. The plains, in effect, become the novel's agents, embracing on yet another level the hierarchical reversal attributed to liminality and further destabilizing the novel's axioms.

Every attempt, past or present, at capturing the essence of the plains, whether by senses or by a camera, eventually proves futile. Thus, Murnane's vision presented in *The Plains* does not depict a place, but, as the analysis shows, an invariably subjective, unidentifiable, liminal space neither fully subservient to the characters' actions nor influential to the point of authority.

4. The Protagonist-Narrator and his Experience of Spaces and Places

The previous analyses employing the concepts of uncanniness and liminality lead us to the further investigation into the peculiarities of *The Plains*—the novel's use of anonymity, the protagonist-narrator's agency, his relationships and his experience of spaces and places in the novel. As the editors of *Landscapes of Liminality* remark "[T]he study of liminality poses to us the problems of categorization and the limitations of language in defining not only geophysical space and/or place, but conceptual, emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical spatial dynamics" (Downey et al. 6). Those problems are inherent to the subject matter of Murnane's novel and resurface in the embracing of the contraries and multiplicity of meanings, and in recognizing the significance of the characters' emotionality regarding each other and their surroundings.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist-narrator undergoes a change elicited by various factors. In the process, his agency regarding the spaces/places he occupies requires detailed inquiry. At the outset of the filmmaker's narration, just after his arrival on the plains, he finds himself in a hotel room reveling in the contentment of his quest

> Late that night I stood at a third-storey window of the largest hotel in the town. I looked past the regular pattern of streetlights towards the dark country beyond. A breeze came in warm gusts from the north.

> I leaned into the surges of air that rose up from the nearest miles of grassland. I composed my face to register a variety of powerful emotions. And I whispered words that might have served a character in a film at the moment when he realized he had found where he belonged. (Murnane, *The Plains* 4–5)

The emotional connectedness with the view and with the hotel room is evoked not only by the implicit sense of motivation and power that marks his quest and physical position but by the atmosphere and the visual aspect of the plains. A "breeze [that] came in warm gusts" and "surges of air" provoke him to "register a variety of powerful emotions." Thus, the scene does not solely depict the filmmaker as the central figure for whom the surroundings and the conditions serve only as a background—they simultaneously influence his behavior. The words he whispers and the thematic reflection point to his feeling of belongingness which destabilizes the binarity of spaces/places. On the one hand, the space of the room that the filmmaker occupies serves him as nothing more than an environment for work, and his connection to it does not deepen with time; on the other hand, his reception of and reaction to what he perceives outside of the window tend to favor the definition of a place since the view's resonance is evident. Marc Augé's concept of "non-places," a transitory space that enables anonymity, could prove its interpretative usefulness as well.

Regarding the anonymity of the characters, a telling part of the characterization, the filmmaker remains nameless, the landowners are referred to only as 1ST LANDOWNER, 2ND LANDOWNER, etc., and, similarly, the filmmaker's patron, his daughter, and wife are known only by their roles. This, combined with the anonymity of the place creates still more distance in the protagonist-landscape-reader triangle. "The lack of naming in *The Plains* takes its focus away from the named Australian landscape and into an imagined interior," which encapsulates both the physical plane of events and the personal one (McInerney 142). The third instance of the interior's manifestation is that of the film-in-progress title. The novel's inland is complemented by the filmmaker's solipsistic first-person point of view, for even when he recalls someone else's words, it is still a part of his retrospection. His movement between sole points of reference (a hotel room, a bar lounge) is met with a singular mention of a vaguely defined space—Eternal Plain, which the filmmaker strives to expose through the film medium. But the idea of this ultimate space which "might have lain beyond or within all that [the man he filmed] had ever seen" gets dispersed as soon as it appears, and thus any potential for establishing connection and so of the transformation of that space into place is inevitably lost (Murnane, *The Plains* 79).

An instance of the place in Tuan's understanding can be found in the aforementioned saloon bar, where the protagonist talks with the plainsmen and researches their culture. In the process, the transformation occurs through the passage of time and the protagonist's endowing the formerly unfamiliar space with his accumulating experiences,

> And then the door from the street was flung open and a new group of plainsmen came in from the dazzling sunlight with their afternoon's work done and settled themselves at the bar to resume

> their lifelong task of shaping from uneventful days in a flat landscape the substance of myth. (Murnane, *The Plains* 17)

The saloon bar's existence as a place, instead of a space, is twofold—what facilitates it is both the personal reception of the filmmaker and the plainsmen's "task of shaping from uneventful days in a flat landscape the substance of myth," the routine to which they are dedicated. Reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's example of the house, the place of their meetings facilitates daydreaming. After all, plainsmen daydream of capturing and preserving their way of living. Later in the scene appears a man willing to publish some of the plainsmen's writings, which leads to discussions about the arts.

Once they subside, the bar 'reappears,' and this time the filmmaker tries to recall some note he had made,

> After lunch, when I was drinking steadily again and things around me had regained their vibrancy, I succeeded in recalling a note I had made in the margin of the scholar's article: 'I, a filmmaker, am admirably equipped to explore this landscape and reveal it to others.' (46)

The bar then offers the filmmaker regaining not only his memory of the note but the self-confidence and feeling of exceptionality regarding his objective. What this detail reveals is, besides the protagonist's disillusionment that takes place throughout the novel, the attempted reinforcement of beliefs. In the filmmaker's eyes, his occupation signifies a higher calling, which gets challenged by the very subject matter of his film-in-progress. The recollection in the passage could thus be read as the protagonist's narcissistic gesture or a sign of a wavering sense of purpose elicited by the occupied spaces/places. In any respect, after taking into account the very little information he reveals about himself, his pre/occupation becomes his character's defining point.

The spaces/places the protagonist occupies and tries to capture are inseparable from the technological device he uses—a camera. As Lana Stockton observes, the characters of *The Plains* "seek to depict, record, piece together … that which evades interpretation, playing out an unsatisfied search for meaning through visual devices" so as to relocate what is hidden in the unspecified space to the sphere of visibility, the place (142). This action is crucial insofar as the filmmaker's reception of spaces goes, for in this way his device becomes an element inextricably connected with the spatial dimension. Moreover, the camera's presence creates a link between itself and the protagonist. Thus, what connects the two is the inability to peek behind the surface. "The equivalency that Murnane draws between the eyes of the narrator and his camera constructs a spectral body as a signifier of discontinuous, ungraspable space," which, defying transformation, unchangingly accompanies the protagonist (128). This 'spatial condition' can also be found in the scene where the patron shows the filmmaker his photographs. In those, the photographed people always turn their heads away from the camera, directing their sight outside of the frame—"To have them engage with the camera would be an acknowledgment

of place, a point of view that disclosed a 'here' and a 'there'" (Genoni 139). Then the possibility of disturbing the status quo is constantly present but never crossed.

Halfway through the novel, the filmmaker describes himself as "young and blind" (Murnane, *The Plains* 81). At that point, his search for meaning is marked with doubt, or rather a realization. As the passages analyzed above illustrate, the blindness found in *The Plains* manifests itself in hope in the possibility of revealing something hidden in the spatial and the personal spheres. Regarding the spaces/places of the novel, however, a certain pattern emerges—the outside spaces that the characters occupy resist transformation into places despite the characters' emotional consolidation. As for the places, as the interpretation of the bar lounge scene shows, they appear either as interiors sheltered from the view of the plains, or that which is "seen" only from the outside and is unattainable from up close. The relationship between the plains and the filmmaker has the Doppler effect. As he gets closer to the space of the plains, their meaning becomes more elusive and the definition recedes farther away. The filmmaker's effort to capture the plains repeatedly proves futile, hence their existence only as a space of possibility and supposition.

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