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Material Geography, Mountains, and A-Nationalism in
Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

Stephanie Jean Burns

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Material Geography, Mountains, and A-Nationalism in
Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

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Scholars over the last two decades or so have become increasingly interested in methods of interpreting history, society, and literature that do not rely on nationalistic paradigms. One vein of the transnational analytic trend is interested not only in the *multiplicity* of cultural geographies but also in the *materiality* of geography. Such critical work is extremely helpful in challenging myopic nationalist readings; yet the materiality of geography used as a theoretical lens has even greater potential. Using geographical formations as a basis for literary analysis can yield a theoretical base that has nothing to do with the borders of nations (whether it be one nation or many nations) and everything to do with the borders of the planet, a material planet indifferent to national affiliation. Instead of a transnational globe, we inhabit an *a-national* earth.

In order for material geography to be used more fully for a-national readings as opposed to transnational critique, it is essential that the physical aspects of said geography not be subsumed in metaphorical applications. Geographer David Harvey has developed ideas about the different conceptions of space and time, and it is this research that can grant material geography a more precise and accurate definition in literary studies, and thus ensure that issues of materiality are not sidelined by metaphorical considerations.

Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry*, when read through a lens of material geography that is focused with Harvey's space and time conceptions, suggests a method of identity formation complicated by the earth's physical insensibility to humankind (I focus specifically on mountains). Other texts of the New Negro era (namely the work of leading lights such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes) also show evidence of entertaining the planet's a-national characteristics. Members of both the old and new guard of the New Negro era worked to construct an alternative to the "Sambo" image of the Old Negro (Gates 130; van Notten 131-33), even though their views on what this image should be were radically different. While New Negro era writers' efforts to forge a new identity for the black person were explicitly focused on race and its connection to the United States, the mountain trope as used in their texts introduces an a-national perspective that challenges not only the identity building being practiced by New Negro era writers but also current uses of transnationalism which too often result in nationalism re-visited. By using the materiality of mountains in *The Blacker the Berry* to introduce a-nationalism, I propose that the novel does not simply explore identity (a point made by several other scholars) but also challenges identity-building practices.

Keywords: nationalism, transnationalism, New Negro era, Wallace Thurman, material geography

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Material Geography, Mountains, and A-Nationalism in Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

In her commemorative essay "Portrait of Wallace Thurman," Mae Gwendolyn Henderson notes how Wallace Thurman's "brief, but colorful and intensely creative" life and literary career mirrored the Harlem Renaissance (147), a movement in which Thurman participated with fluctuating enthusiasm (van Notten 95, 121, 212). Best known for his 1929 novel, *The Blacker the Berry . . .*, Thurman also published other of his works in well-known Harlem magazines like *The Messenger* and *Opportunity*, and served as the editor-in-chief of *Fire!!*, a short-lived but ambitious and enduringly significant journal dedicated to Harlem's rising generation of artists (van Notten 132-33). While Thurman's time in Harlem is the most studied period of his life, Thurman only lived nine of his 32 years in New York. Born on August 16, 1902, in Salt Lake City, Thurman completed portions of his schooling in Utah, Idaho, Illinois, and California before making his debut in Harlem on September 7, 1925.

Even after Thurman's arrival, Harlem was by no means a permanent residence for him. Despite his negative reports of Salt Lake City (Thurman at one point derisively recalled the "many dull hours [he] spent there, and the many dull people [he] spent them with" ["Quoth" 398]), he often returned to visit his birthplace throughout the 1920s (van Notten 69-70). During one such visit, in July of 1929, Thurman wrote to his close friend William Jourdan Rapp about a three-day long "roughing it" excursion he took in the mountains and woods surrounding Salt Lake City. He reported that he had produced "scads of poetry none of which however is worth a second look" ("Letters" 153). However, Thurman still went on to quote one of the poems, entitled "Stars," in its entirety:

Earth turns

Sun sinks westward into sea
 And the night brings forth
 Your terse banality.

Insensible to mental probing
 Lost to day, immune to night
 Sparkling infinitudes
 Mere architectural curly-cues
 Signifying nothing.

“Which last line is a good criticism of the entire poem,” observed Thurman to Rapp (“Letters” 153).

Thurman claimed that this poem was devoid of all meaning, similar to the stars and, by implication, the earth itself because it also orbits among the heavenly bodies. And yet the initial impulse of “Stars” does not seem to be to demonstrate nature’s dumbness but rather to spur nature to communicate. Through mental probing, the poem’s speaker hopes to expand the stars’ “terse banality” into a more comprehensive conversation. But the stars are “insensible” to the speaker’s efforts. If one takes the word *insensible* to describe that which is incapable of physically feeling or mentally perceiving (“Insensible”), the speaker’s mental probing has revealed something even more sobering than the stars’ unresponsiveness: if this unresponsiveness is an inherent property of the stars rather than a conscious refusal to engage, then what is the ultimate source of the original “terse banality” that the speaker first identified? If not from the stars, which, by definition, are incapable of perception and so therefore incapable of true communication, then from whom could this terse banality come but the speaker? The trivial

briefness and the lack of depth is not a characteristic of the stars but of the speaker (as the producer of thoughts that signify nothing). By extension, the speaker's conclusion that these "mere architectural curly-cues" are in fact "signifying nothing" can also be read as the speaker's opinion of humankind and its vain efforts to create anything of lasting import.¹

And while Thurman himself claims the poem to be without significance, he still shares it with Rapp. As a preface to the poem, Thurman explains how his time in the mountains made him "feel like a million dollars" ("Letters" 153) and perhaps this poem (and the rest of the poetry he composed) was an effort to explain the mountains' influence on him. What is it about the mountains that spurred Thurman to write so much material, if the mountains are indeed partly responsible? Did Thurman feel betrayed by nature's indifference after nature seemed to have offered him so much: an invigorated body and mind and "scads of poetry," even if it was poor?

Thurman's complex interaction with the earth and its geography as exemplified by "Stars" resonates with current developments in literary studies that use geography as a framework for analyzing literature, culture, and identity. Scholars over approximately the last two decades have become increasingly interested in "loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation" by developing methods of building identities that rely on transnational geographical models (Dimock, *Continents* 4). From Benedict Anderson's classic discussions of the nation-state as a historically contingent form, to Paul Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic,² to interpretations of diaspora studies that resist totalizing community building, to scholarship questioning imperialism in Latin America and establishing the significance of the Caribbean isles in national heterogeneity, heuristics that engage the globe rather than the nation are expanding methods of thinking about identity.³ One vein of the transnational analytic trend is interested not only in the *multiplicity* of cultural geographies but also in the *materiality* of

geography.⁴ Scholars in the field of oceanic studies, for instance, have downplayed imagined national borders by attempting to engage directly with the physical world of the sea.⁵ As one example, in her 2010 essay “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies,” Hester Blum advocates for this type of material engagement by arguing, “The sea is not a metaphor”(671).

Such critical work is extremely helpful in furthering anti-American-exceptionalist projects and in recognizing and exploring the multiple and frequently marginalized identities, peoples, and nations that have shaped a traditionally homogenized United States. One scholar has even noted that “the relevant fact about transnationalism is its potential for forging new identities,” even de-stabilized new identities that are “a necessary precondition for regaining agency” from the oppressive nationstate (Fluck 375, 371). Yet transnationalism used as a method for building identity is not without its woes: one of prime pitfalls of any identity politics is its propensity to reinforce “the very thing from which is apparently wants to escape,”⁶ and scholars have been quick to analyze transnationalism’s uncomfortable relationship with nationalism and even its role as a new form of nationalism.⁷ Using geographical formations as a basis for literary analysis can yield a theoretical base that has nothing to do with the borders of nations (whether it be one nation or many nations) and everything to do with the borders of the planet, a material planet indifferent to transnational affiliations. In other words, we might say that instead of a transnational globe, we inhabit what I am describing as an *a-national* earth. While traveling across the surface of the earth has been cited by Paul Gilroy (among others) as a mode of “[evading] specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity” (19), identity might also be reconceived by not merely traveling on the earth but incorporating its modes of being into our own, that is, by becoming insensible, as much as humanly possible, towards national and transnational prejudices and their influence on conceptions of race.

In order for the a-national characteristics of material geography to be fully realized and thus fully incorporated into identity-building practices, it is essential that the physical aspects of said geography not be subsumed in metaphorical applications.⁸ In Paul Giles' call "to reconsider American literature specifically in the context of geographical materialism" by "[thinking] through the variegated forms of its imaginary relations to the real dimensions of physical space" (1), Giles does not specify exactly what the "real dimensions of physical space" are, explaining that his "use of spatial and temporal coordinates . . . are themselves, of course, metaphorical constructions" (2). Similarly, Blum, in her article on oceanic studies, goes on to describe the sea as "workplace, home, passage, penitentiary, and promise," a whole string of metaphorical descriptions (671).

It should not be surprising that an escape from metaphor when analyzing material geography proves difficult. Words themselves are metaphors, and so to directly engage with what Martin Heidegger calls "the thingly character of the thing" (174)—whether it be an ocean, a mountain, a hammer, or a jug—is impossible, at least if such engagement is to be recorded and analyzed. Still, many literary scholars are less inclined to acknowledge the various modes of defining the space and time conceptions that make up material spaces. Giles credits geographer David Harvey with coining the phrase "geographical materialism." Harvey's mention of the term comes at the conclusion of his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), but it is more of a quick reference to further research vistas than anything else. In other of his work, however, Harvey develops ideas about the different conceptions of space and time, and it is this research that can (as I discuss later in this article) grant material geography a more precise and accurate definition, and thus ensure that issues of materiality are not sidelined by metaphorical considerations.

Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry*, when read through a lens of material geography that is focused with Harvey's space and time conceptions, suggests a method of identity formation less intent on redefining a race through transnational connections, and more interested in exploring the earth's insensibility to humankind in general (in this case, I follow Thurman's "roughing it" expedition in focusing specifically on mountains). There exists no shortage of scholarly interpretations of *Blacker* that use the text to explore Thurman's sexual identity specifically and Harlem's sexual identity generally,⁹ identifying how Thurman's work and life "[cross] over racial and cultural borders" (Knadler 902). However, scholarship is notably lacking in analyses about the text's intersections with material geography and its influence on identity. The one article that does engage with the text's "geospatial awareness" as defined by islands uses this awareness to make transnational connections (Roberts 92-93), and by using the materiality of mountains in the text to introduce a-nationalism, I propose that the novel does not simply explore identity but also challenges identity-building practices.

Blacker primarily chronicles the post-high school journey of Emma Lou Morgan, an African American woman who feels cursed by what she believes to be the excessively dark color of her skin. After leaving the blue vein community in her childhood town of Boise to attend college in California and there confronting further prejudice, Emma Lou travels to Harlem. She continues striving to tie herself to people with lighter skin, becoming entangled with the smooth-talking sweetback Alva;¹⁰ at the novel's end, Emma Lou determines to leave Alva and instead seek not only "economic and mental independence" but also "acceptance of herself by herself" (*Blacker* 217). Other texts of the New Negro era (namely the work of leading lights such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes) also show evidence of entertaining the planet's a-national characteristics. Members of both the old and new guard of the New Negro era worked to

construct an alternative to the “Sambo” image of the Old Negro (Gates 130; van Notten 131-33), even though their views on what this image should be were radically different. While New Negro era writers’ efforts to forge a new identity for the black person were explicitly focused on race and its connection to the United States, the mountain trope as used in their texts introduces an a-national perspective that challenges not only the identity building being practiced by New Negro era writers but also current uses of transnationalism which too often result in nationalism re-visited.

Recovering Materiality in Geography

Harvey’s 1989 introduction of the term “historical-geographical materialism” came at the beginning of a period in which scholars in various fields began to analyze how the interactions of people with the material and geographical world, as dictated by survival, have shaped and continue to shape societies and culture.¹¹ In other of his research, Harvey has recognized the complexity of defining the geographical spaces of the earth, a task which I propose should be actively practiced during any attempt at applying material geography to literary texts so that metaphorical definitions of those spaces do not subsume material characteristics, characteristics which better inform metaphorical meanings. Three of Harvey’s notions of space and time are, first, absolute space and absolute time, second, relative space-time, and third, relational spacetime.¹²

Harvey defines absolute space and time as “fixed and immovable”: through standardized measurements, objects and places are given unique locations and occurrences in the defined expanse of space and time (e.g., coordinates within the grid of latitudinal and longitudinal lines and the linear theory of the passage of time). Harvey uses the “exclusionary space of private property” as an example of how absolute space works in the social realm (*Cosmopolitanism*

134). To extend Harvey's example, under the absolute space conception, a mountain would be represented by its precise location on a cadastral map. The absolute space and time paradigm would also address the physical characteristics of the mountain. In the absolute space and time paradigm, matter and processes occur *in* space and *in* time, as if space and time were pre-existing formations waiting to be populated (137).

Conversely, in the relative space-time conception, matter and processes directly influence space and time rather than simply occurring *in* them (*Cosmopolitanism* 137). Space and time are not independent measurements but rather intertwined into space-time, and the layout of space-time is determined primarily by fluid perspectives rather than absolute measurements. Instead of inhabiting one unique location, objects can be defined by a multiplicity of locations all established from different frames of reference (135). Under this conception, a mountain's physical height becomes negotiable, depending on the perspective of the person determining the measurement. The relative space-time paradigm acknowledges that while a map can accurately show one aspect of the earth's geography—direction, for example—it would misrepresent another aspect, such as area, the latitude-longitude-based Mercator map being a prime example of this misrepresentation (136).

Harvey's final conception, relational spacetime, is perhaps best captured in his own words:

Matter and processes do not exist *in* space-time or even affect it Space and time are internalized within matter and process. Whitehead argues . . . that "the fundamental order of ideas is first a world of things in relation, then the space whose fundamental entities are defined by means of those relations and whose

properties are deduced from the nature of these relations.” It is impossible to disentangle space from time. They fuse into spacetime. (*Cosmopolitanism* 137)

Within this conception, a mountain would be defined by the relations connecting the mountain’s various characteristics. Under relational spacetime, the presence of rich coal deposits in a mountain would not only be quantities to be measured by geologists. Rather, the space the mountain occupies would also be created by the opinions of community members about how the coal deposits should be used, and these opinions would be influenced by each community members’ past experiences, present philosophies, and future hopes.

Harvey ultimately argues that it is only by keeping the three conceptions of absolute, relative, and relational “in dialectical tensions with each other” that we can approach a full comprehension of space and its potential as a form of knowing (*Cosmopolitanism* 141). While Harvey does admit to sometimes assigning the three paradigms a sort of “hierarchy” in that “relational space can embrace the relative and the absolute, relative space can embrace the absolute, but absolute space is just absolute and that is that,” he accompanies this confession with the assertion that he finds it “far more interesting in principle . . . to constantly think through the interplay among them” (141). I concur with Harvey, with the following caveat for literary uses of the materiality of geography: when we consider material geography in the absolute space and time conception first and then conscientiously translate those observations into the relative and relational paradigms, we are less likely to rush into identity formations based on materially inaccurate metaphorical constructions.¹³ Due consideration of geography’s materiality introduces the dialectical interplay of the planet’s ability to both engage and be insensible towards efforts at identity formation.

Wai Chee Dimock has championed planetary engagement as a way to dismantle the nation-state and any of its concomitant oppressive identities. In referencing Hurricane Katrina specifically and natural disasters generally, she maintains that, as a result of such catastrophes, the nation is revealed to be what it is: an epiphenomenon, literally a superficial construct, a set of erasable lines on the face of the earth. It is no match for that grounded entity called the planet, which can wipe out those lines at a moment's notice, using weapons of mass destruction more powerful than any homeland defense. (*Shades* 1)

Here, the planet is presented as being a more solid and reliable theoretical foundation than nationalism. Others have also noted the planet's solidity as compared to humankind's insignificance, referring to the planet as a "fixed mass," unified even underneath the oceans.¹⁴

Yet to call the planet a "grounded entity" is not entirely accurate, especially in light of the millennium- and eon-spanning duration of what Dimock has elsewhere introduced as "deep time" (*Continents* 6). The earth's crust or lithosphere is made up of around a dozen large sections, or plates (in addition to several smaller plates), that float around on a viscous layer of partially melted rock, shifting at a rate of half an inch to four inches every year (Silverstein 11, 12). These plates collide, causing earthquakes. Or they spread apart, creating volcanoes. Or they bump and rub against each other, building both continental and oceanic mountain ranges (13). Tectonic plates are evidence of an ever-changing planet, rather than a grounded mass. In fact, many textbooks on the theory of plate tectonics begin their discussions by citing Earth's instability, some of them in their first sentences: "We usually think of the ground under our feet as firm and solid, but it is not always so," begins one work; "Humans live on unsteady ground," opens a second; and yet another debuts, "Earth is a restless planet. The ground that seems solid

underfoot can suddenly begin to shake and heave with the violent force of an earthquake.”¹⁵

When Dimock refers to the planet’s “weapons of mass destruction,” she does not fully acknowledge that it is often the earth’s dynamism rather than its grounded-ness that produces such powerful forces. In searching for a materially-oriented metaphor against which to contrast the impermanence of the nation, Dimock neglects full engagement with the materiality of the earth.

In fact, if Dimock is interested in exchanging static national identities for fluid transnational ones, deeper consideration of the absolute characteristics of the earth’s surface as dictated by plate tectonics presents an even more appropriate metaphor. While the surface of the earth generally appears stable, its fluid foundation indicates otherwise: just as nationalistic paradigms stereotype individuals into non-negotiable identities, transnational paradigms would “[accelerate] the movement between subject positions,” introducing an identity of “flow and flexibility in which the individual is constantly in movement and no longer tied to any subject position that may define and trap her” (Fluck 376). But tectonic plates only move inches per year, as opposed to the transnational identity which requires constant and expeditious redefinition, a tall order for any individual or group which has long been shackled by the agenda of nationalism. The gradual, virtually imperceptible movement of the earth’s surface mirrors one of the arguably problematic characteristics of transnationalism, that it can “not be separated from the national from which it takes its point of departure” (Fluck 366). The movement of the earth is often difficult to differentiate from its dormancy, just as transnationalism can easily take on the less than savory characteristics of national exceptionalism. So not only would a more rigorous consideration of the absolute material properties of the planet better inform Dimock’s metaphor, it would also reveal some of the problematic tenets of the theories with which she is working.

Material geography thus has the power to simultaneously inform and critique theories about identity, creating a helpful dialectic that keeps the issues inherent in identity building a part of any critical conversation.

A-Nationalism in New Negro Era Writings

Wallace Thurman's personal writings and fictional works display an eagerness to define himself outside of the boundaries of his race and any nation. Wrote Thurman, "To me race is nothing. It has its importance perhaps to my environment and to my physical and psychological structure but above all I am an individual of no race, creed, color or country" (qtd. in van Notten 117).¹⁶ Thurman's concession that his race may have influenced his environment, as well as his physical and mental being, leads one to ponder if there is any part of Thurman's identity that his race *hasn't* influenced. Still, the theme of indifference to race is repeated in *The Blacker the Berry* by Truman Walter at the rent party (Truman being traditionally recognized as Thurman himself). In criticizing the racial and intra-racial prejudice of white people and lighter skinned black people, Truman remarks, "I cannot say that I see a great deal of difference in any of their actions. They are human beings first and only white or black incidentally" (145). While Thurman's reluctance to ally himself fully with his race has been noted, as well as the hopes of other New Negro era writers to "transcend" racial labeling,¹⁷ these attitudes have not been explored as a function of these writer's interactions with material geography, particularly the material characteristics of mountains. Mountain references in New Negro era texts, when analyzed using material geography, are not fully supportive of the identity-building agendas of the texts, but instead challenge them and introduce a-national options for self-definition. While humankind's indifference to race is not directly analogous to material geography's insensitivity towards such categories—the mind requires conscious effort in order to feel indifferent towards

anything, while a mountain's insensibility towards humankind is inherent—the a-nationalism expressed by both breaks the grip of the white world on the project of redefining the black image.

This redefinition of the black image by black artists constitutes the New Negro era, which began in the late nineteenth century and ran through the 1930s.¹⁸ While the “Old Negro was a trope that depicted the African diaspora as an inferior race” (Gates and Jarrett 1), the “New Negro offered an image conflating blackness with urban sophistication, educational attainment, middle-class poise, and economic success” (Roberts, *Ambassadors* 11). But artists did not always agree about what kind of art was required to create this image, or on what kind of image was desirable (Gates and Jarrett 15). One of the many schisms of the era existed between the first generation of black artists (the old guard) and a second generation of black artists (the new guard): the new guard felt that the old guard, in their efforts at appearing sophisticated and thus “meriting the full rights of US citizenship” (Roberts, *Ambassadors* 12), were creating an art that would be palatable to white audiences more than it would accurately represent the black experience (van Notten 132-36). On the surface, much of the New Negro era writing (Thurman's included) is fully invested in this heated conversation about racial identification.

However, just as mountains appear to be stationary but in reality are shifting masses, the underlying material elements of metaphorical mountain references destabilize the New Negro era's overt message of racial identification. One example of this phenomenon is Langston Hughes' 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” which begins with Hughes chastising an unnamed young black poet for wanting to be “a poet—not a Negro poet” (27). This poet has been identified as Countee Cullen, who Thurman, despite his own desire to define himself apart from his race, considered to be “[wasting his] talent” because he was not more

inclined to seek “the lower elements of Negro life for his poetic rhythms and material” but instead was interested in pleasing “bourgeois black America and sentimental white America” (van Notten 145, 146). Although Thurman wanted to believe race to be “nothing” and “incidental,” he also hoped to establish the black image as represented by the “lower social strata, concentrating specifically on those elements which [he] considered...still uniquely black and racially distinct” (van Notten 132). Hughes elaborates further, “This is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness” (27). Hughes continues to describe the material possessions of some black families, possessions that seem specifically aimed at aligning these families with white America and that create an even greater challenge at defining the New Negro: “A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people” (28).

When read from a perspective of material geography, Hughes’ mountain and the way to conquer it become ambiguous. Initially, Hughes describes the mountain as “standing in the way of any true Negro art in America,” suggesting that “true Negro art” is on the other side of the mountain, presumably in a valley or perhaps on another mountain obscured by the white mountain. Hughes’ directive to “climb” the mountain in order to “discover” true racial art suggests that this is not a mountain that one can simply walk around—it must be climbed, and then descended in order to reach true art on the other side. Yet Hughes’ concluding sentence, “we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (300), suggests that the artist is to scale the mountain and then remain on the top of it, acknowledging people’s wishes to enter the white world but then discovering true art on the top of their vain wishing. If this is the case, then true racial art needs white-world striving as its foundation—this suggests an art that relies on defining itself against the very opponent from which it hopes to break free (a common pitfall of

transnational readings).¹⁹ However, if true art is located on the other side of the mountain and not on top of it, this suggests an art that could be free from ties to the white world, and free, by extension, from ties to any race or nation. The explicit message of Hughes' essay definitely favors the former interpretation, but when the material characteristics of his metaphorical mountain are more carefully considered, one can detect an undercurrent that highlights the latter analysis and offers a critique to Hughes' overt solution of conquering the white mountain.

Another mountain reference used by W.E.B. Du Bois, a member of the old guard, suggests a shared disregard of race. In his famous book *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois discusses how, for some African Americans, gaining an education is hoped to be "the mountain path to Canaan" (4). Here, Du Bois is less concerned with the absolute or relative geographical space that is Canaan, and is instead more interested in the relational significance of Canaan. Canaan has long held symbolic importance for Jews, Muslims, and Christians as, first, the covenant land promised to Abraham (*King James Bible*, Gen. 17.8) and, second, as the destination of the previously enslaved children of Israel (Exod. 1.7-14; 23.20, 23, 27-30). By invoking Canaan as a destination for liberated African Americans, Du Bois is reaching through both space and time to connect his current people's plight (and hopefully success) with that of the children of Israel. Du Bois' space and time preference is the relational paradigm, and the connection between the children of Israel and black Americans is clearly laden with racial significance and national identification.

Du Bois further describes the mountain path as potentially "leading to heights high enough to overlook life" (4). Which meaning of the verb "to overlook" is Du Bois employing? One possibility might be "to look (a thing) over or through; to examine, scrutinize, inspect" ("Overlook," 3) or perhaps "to survey; to view openly" ("Overlook," 1a). These meanings

suggest a perspective that takes into account the difficult position of black identity in the United States yet also seeks to re-inscribe that position in a new way: the “journey” of climbing the mountain path, writes Du Bois, gives “leisure for reflection and self-examination. . . , with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, [and] self-respect” (5). Under this interpretation, the position of the black person is being examined within the confines of the nation. However, another meaning of “to overlook” is “to fail to see or observe; to pass over without noticing; to leave out of consideration, disregard, ignore” (“Overlook,” 4a). This meaning suggests an indifference to life’s challenges rather than a scrutiny of them. To perhaps read Du Bois against the grain, this third definition indicates the role of sweeping (mountain-produced) vistas as presenting race not as a formation requiring analysis but rather as a formation that legitimately elicits indifference or disregard.

Mountain references used in New Negro era texts challenge the larger project of the New Negro era of redefining race within the nation of the United States and instead introduce material geography’s insensibility as a model of defining oneself a-nationally. And I propose that Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* serves as an initial touchstone for the larger project of investigating a-national strains in the New Negro era for several reasons. As a novel-length work, multiple references to mountains, geographical space, and their material characteristics are made throughout. In addition, its self-proclaimed theme of intra-racial prejudice is directly concerned with issues of identity formation as Emma Lou continually searches for ““the right sort of people,”” (that is, lighter-skinned people)—instead of overlooking her dark skin, she exacerbates and even creates the negative reactions that society has towards her because of it (59, 200). So intent is her quest that Emma Lou has a difficult time viewing the material world without immediately relating that world to blackness. Upon first arriving at school in Los

Angeles, Emma Lou is given tours of the city, taking interest in only those places where African Americans are present. Even a geographical feature as impressive as the Pacific Ocean holds little meaning for her:

The Pacific Ocean in itself did not cause her heartbeat to quicken, nor did the roaring of its waves find an emotional echo within her. But on coming upon Bruce's Beach for colored people near Redondo, or the little strip of sandied [sic] shore they had appropriated for themselves at Santa Monica, the Pacific Ocean became an intriguing something to contemplate as a background for their activities. Everything was interesting as it was patronized, reflected through, or acquired by Negroes. (36)

Throughout the novel, Emma Lou's interpretation of reality is demonstrated to be impulsive and naïve. She believes "an efficient bleaching agent" that would lighten her skin to be more valuable than her high school diploma (23). She assumes immediately that hasty sexual interest from Weldon Taylor will lead to matrimony (only to learn this was never his intention) (64-5, 68-9). And she builds her image of the "ideal" male companion based on manner of dress and skin color (124). Described as having an "immature mind" (24), Emma Lou is reported to "[measure] everything by her own moods and reactions" and "[translate] everything into the language of Emma Lou" (190). Throughout her saga, readers are made privy to the motivations of other characters before Emma Lou realizes them, further exposing Emma Lou's ill-informed outlook on life.²⁰

Because Emma Lou's naivety is so often exposed throughout the novel, her attitude towards the materiality of the Pacific Ocean and other geographical features,²¹ as well as her continual focus on blackness (or rather, lightness), are also clearly attitudes that should be

discounted. In suggesting that the racial component that can be seen from Emma Lou's particular overlook would be better *overlooked*, the economy of the novel's narrative invites a deeper look at material geography, and a de-emphasis on racial-national or transnational affiliation of any kind. As oceanic scholar Iain Chambers explains, "Contemplating undulating seascapes can lead to rethinking ideas of time, space, and change" (679), and, when these ideas of time, space, and change are subjected to the rigors Harvey's space and time paradigms, the materiality of geography can yield its most fruitful interpretations.

Mountains of the West

Emma Lou's story begins with her graduation from high school in Boise, Idaho, yet the narrative's forward flow is interrupted in order to discuss how Emma Lou's maternal grandparents came to settle in "the Rocky Mountain states" (26). Originally from Kansas and never having experienced slavery as a result of their mulatto parents being granted their freedom, Samuel and Maria Lightfoot believe Kansas to contain "too many reminders of that which their parents had escaped and from which they wished to flee" because of its proximity to the "former slave belt" (26). They are described as having "only one compelling desire," that is, "to put as much physical and mental space between them and the former home of their parents as was possible" (25-26). The text lists "physical" space before "mental" space, suggesting that, for Samuel and Maria, movement through the absolute space and time paradigm is a prerequisite to creating a relational spacetime existence in which the Lightfoots and their descendants will not be "classed with those hordes of hungry, ragged, ignorant black folk" who are former slaves (26).

But how far, physically speaking, is far enough to have the adequate mental space to establish the desired "select Negro social group" (27)? The Lightfoots determine "the Rocky

Mountain states” to be adequate because they are “too far away for the recently freed slaves to reach, especially since most of them [believe] that the world [ends] just a few miles north of the Mason-Dixon line” (26). Here, the text outlines the contrasting relative world views of the Lightfoots and the recently freed slaves. It seems that the Lightfoots hold the more realistic view in realizing the Mason-Dixon Line’s ineffectiveness at clearly demarcating the difference between freed people and enslaved or recently freed people. Indeed, scholar Max Grivno has recently described the Mason-Dixon Line as “more of a smudge,” noting that the “crude geography that pointed north to freedom and south to slavery was sometimes unreliable. . . . Free and enslaved blacks crisscrossed the Mason-Dixon Line in ways that muddied sectional differences” (15, 13). Many fugitive slaves, Frederick Douglass included, described the extreme difficulty of negotiating the unfamiliar geography surrounding the famous boundary, causing Grivno to conclude that “the Mason-Dixon Line may have figured prominently on maps and in slaves’ imaginations, but it was invisible to those on the ground” (Grivno 15-16). What the Line lacks is a concrete physical existence, even though its absolute existence was charted by maps and its relational significance amply developed by people’s imaginations. It is this lack of concreteness backing up the metaphor of both the map and the mind that leads to the creation of a misinformed relative world, a belief that the “world end[s] just a few miles north of the Mason-Dixon line” (26). Neither the map nor the mind accurately represent what is “on the ground,” the physical geography that complicates the quick and easy escape to freedom. For the recently freed slaves, rather than this being a physical escape, it is more of a social escape from prejudice, which Emancipation unfortunately did not provide. The fact that the recently freed slaves are still using the Mason-Dixon Line to define their world indicates that national boundaries of prejudice against black people are still very much in place, in their own minds and in society.

By allying themselves with the Rocky Mountain states, it may appear that the Lightfoots are attempting to create a community indifferent to national borders and hopefully to national and racial prejudice. The Rocky Mountains, nicknamed “the backbone of a continent” (Elias x) are a-national, being completely insensible to national lines. However, rather than incorporating a-national theories into their lifestyle, the Lightfoots the blue vein society is still very much defined by the constraints of the nation, even that portion of the nation from which they were supposedly attempting to flee, that is, the South. “Were they not a superior class?” reads the text:

Were they not a very high type of Negro, comparable to the persons of color groups in the West Indies? . . . In their veins was some of the best blood of the South. They were closely akin to the only true aristocrats in the United States. Even the slave masters had been aware of and acknowledged in some measure their superiority. Having some of Marse George’s blood in their veins set them apart from ordinary Negroes at birth. (28)

Scholar Brian Roberts has observed that “culturally speaking, [Emma Lou’s] Boise community aspires to become a far-flung island of the Caribbean archipelago” (“[Ex]Isles” 100). While Roberts keenly illustrates how this desire reflects the “insular geocultural sensibility” pervasive throughout the novel (an insularity emblematic of interracial prejudice) (100), the Boise community’s ultimate aspirations are less tied to the Caribbean than they are to their perception of the white “aristocrats” of the South. The Lightfoots are intent on maintaining their supposed preferential position and becoming “whiter and whiter every generation,’ until [their] grandchildren . . . [can] easily go over into the white race and become assimilated so that problems of race [will] plague them no more” (29). By attempting to “continue [the] natural division in Negro society” which places lighter skinned people above darker skinned ones, the

Lightfoots have in fact aligned themselves more closely with the geography of the Mason-Dixon Line as a reinforcer of national prejudice than with the geography of the Rocky Mountain range and its insensibility to national boundaries.

Because of her dark skin, Emma Lou is “the alien member of the family and of the family’s social circle” (31): her grandmother Maria considers Emma Lou’s absentee father, Jim Morgan, “an ordinary black nigger” (30), indicating that she feels his dark-skinned progeny to be a reminder of the very kind of people she and her husband fled from in Kansas. Emma Lou’s presence encroaches on the mental distance the blue-vein society was hoping to create, as well as proves that the physical distance her grandparents traversed is not enough to keep them from being connected with people like Jim Morgan. While Emma Lou does occupy an absolute physical space in her family’s home, she is constantly reminded that, because of her relatively darker skin, she can never find a place in the relational world created by the blue veins. Emma Lou is even reticent to make post-graduation plans, reasoning that there is “no place in the world for a girl as black as she [is] anyway” (34). Her experience as a freshman at the University of Southern California unfortunately reinforces this belief, causing Emma Lou to conclude yet again that there is “no place in the world for a dark girl” (34).

But then during her summer break back in Boise, Emma Lou seems to find her place with Weldon Taylor, a young man working in the West with the intention of re-entering medical school in the East. After their initial meeting during a community picnic, Emma Lou submits herself physically to Weldon later that same day. As a backdrop to this romantic interlude, the “sun [has] disappeared behind the snow capped mountains . . . [and] the colors of day [are] slowly being dominated by the colors of night” (63). The presence of snow on these mountains indicates that they are higher than the foot hills where the community picnic is being held. Emma

Lou's search to find "heights high enough to overlook life," by her standards, is about to reach a satisfying conclusion. While Weldon's skin is not as light as Emma Lou would like, its "bronze-colored" hue seems assurance enough that her isolation from society will end with their relationship. Rather than overlooking race, Emma Lou is still acutely attuned to it (63). Rather than hoping to somehow traverse around the urge to enter the white world represented by the snow capped mountains, Emma Lou desperately wants to be a part of it.

While Emma Lou believes this "one isolated experience" (in addition to Weldon's continued sexual interest) to portend a place in society as Weldon's wife (65), the geographical site of their physical union would suggest otherwise. The picnic is held in a meadow "on the outskirts of the city, surrounded on three sides by verdant foothills" and it is into these foothills that Weldon leads Emma Lou (62). Already, Weldon has taken Emma Lou into an area on the outskirts of the outskirts: a map depicting the absolute boundaries of Boise would confirm this much. Emma Lou's position becomes even more peripheral as Weldon leads "her to a huge boulder which [juts] out, elbow like, from the side of a hill, and which [is] hidden from the meadow below by clumps of bushes" (63). Emma Lou's removal from society is now five-fold: she has come from a park on the outskirts of the city into the mountain area surrounding the park near a boulder protruding from one of these hills, obscured from the park by the bushes. Rather than entering into the white world, Emma Lou is still being elbowed out.

While it makes sense that Weldon would seek out a secluded area because of his intentions, Emma Lou does not recognize that his future plans have nothing to do with publicly declaring his affection through marriage. She instead constructs a blissful, ungrounded "panorama of the future. . . . There [are] no black spots in it, no shadows, nothing but luminous landscapes, ethereal in substance" (64). Emma Lou's panorama is incompatible with the material

elements of the snow-capped mountains of earlier: mountains viewed at a distance are covered in shadows from ravines and black spots from vegetation. Furthermore, the mountains that are visible at least during the beginning of Emma Lou's and Weldon's liaison are being "dominated by the colors of night," making them anything but "luminous landscapes." Emma Lou has assumed that the relational space she has created is shared by Weldon, considering "her own imaginative powers omniscient" (65), and not bridling those powers with any consideration of the material. Because she and Weldon occupied the same absolute space near the boulder, this is enough to convince her that Weldon has also "been lifted into a superlatively perfect emotional and physical state" which could only lead to matrimony (65). Both Emma Lou's mother and Uncle Joe are skeptical of Weldon's intentions, but Uncle Joe especially neglects to reign in Emma Lou's projections, reasoning that there will "be time enough to worry about the future when its problems materialized" (66).

When the future does materialize with Weldon abruptly leaving town to become a Pullman porter, Emma Lou's luminous landscape evaporates. She wishes to "escape both home and school" (69), believing Boise and Los Angeles to be "small-[towns] mentally, peopled by mentally small southern Negroes," and she decides to go to the East (69). Her flight from the West to the East is an ironic parallel to the flight of her grandparents from the South to the West, as Emma Lou vainly tries to breach the borders of a paradigm that has placed people with darker skin on the periphery of society, while she simultaneously reinforces that paradigm with her own prejudices.

Mountains of the East

Emma Lou's quest to become connected with "the right sort of people" continues in Harlem, leading to her co-dependent relationship with Alva (200). Scholarly examinations of the

novel's conclusion have focused mainly on Emma Lou's encounter with Alva's homosexual behavior, reading the scene as an indication of Thurman's own homosexual struggle.²² I instead read Emma Lou's experience directly *before* her meeting with Alva as a more integral scene in the novel's overall stance on identity. Emma Lou has just experienced another cruel irony of her position in society with Benson's announcement of his engagement to Gwendolyn: it appears that Gwendolyn, who before gave Emma Lou "lectures on race purity and the superiority of unmixed racial types" (199) and scorned the lighter-skinned Benson (214), has decided instead that she *will* marry someone with lighter skin than her own, confirming Emma Lou's prejudices.

In light of this news, Emma Lou considers returning to Boise, but after further thought, she decides instead to stay in Harlem, reasoning that "one only wasted time and strength seeking facile open-sesame means instead of pushing along a more difficult and direct path" (217). The phrase "open sesame" has been indexed by fairy-tale scholar Stith Thompson as a motif carrying the following function: "Mountain opens to magic formula" (269). While the motif is found in over ten diverse cultures worldwide (269), perhaps one of the most famous occurrences of the phrase appears in Antoine Galland's 1704 edition of *The Arabian Nights* under the story "Ali Baba." In this tale, Ali Baba's scheming brother, Cassim, follows Ali Baba to a magical cave from which he has accessed great treasures. While Cassim is able to enter the cave using the password he overhears from Ali Baba—that is, "Open sesame!"—he forgets the correct password when trying to exit the cave, instead trying numerous incorrect versions, leading to his capture and demise by the forty thieves who inhabit the cave (Chraïbi 5-6).

Emma Lou's hopes that "life would open up for her" have, up to this point, been in vain, just as Cassim's hopes to exit the enchanted cave safely by opening up the mountain prove to be futile (217). When Emma Lou is earlier contemplating whether to flee Harlem, she initially

seems to have found her own magical password: upon seeing the sign of the New York telegraph office, she repeats “over and over to herself Western Union, Western Union, as if to understand its meaning,” a meaning that she desperately hopes will access the white world (215). But if Emma Lou is intent on opening up her world, she is using the wrong password: “Union” suggests closure rather than rupture, and “Western Union” especially suggests the close-mindedness of the blue-vein society in Boise, an exclusionary attitude largely reflected throughout the United States. What Emma Lou has desired in the past is a password that will open up the white world just long enough to let her in, but then close quickly enough to keep the rest of dark skinned society out. Once she realizes that returning to Boise is not the answer, acknowledging that “mere geographical flights had not solved her problems in the past” (215), she begins to focus on her options for finding “her place in life” through economic independence (217).

However, Emma Lou’s determination to “accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable [and] to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be” suggests that she has not yet abandoned a racial identity (217). Perhaps she has problematized her concept of self by recognizing her own racism, but her view of herself and others is still very much entrenched in a national paradigm. The mere act of rethinking one’s position in life does not always guarantee a better result, just as transnational readings do not inherently produce “better” identities than national ones. The destabilizing capability of transnationalism can “praise movements of peoples and ideas for their own sake, as if movement were a good thing in itself” (Fluck 376). A closer look at the “open-sesame means” that Emma Lou rightfully disdains indicates another instance in which the text of *The Blacker the Berry* suggests that national or

transnational identities can effectively be replaced by a-national ones as influenced by the material world.

At first consideration, the origin of “open-sesame” in Galland’s collection seems to point to transnationalism more than any other paradigm.²³ Galland’s *The Arabian Nights* has been celebrated as a combination of “tales and stories from the most diverse origins, sources, and genres” (Marzolph ix) and described “as a work in progress that acquired its content and character in the process of an open development in which different authors could contribute and introduce their own variations” (Chraïbi 3). The open and variable nature of storytelling is something to which Emma Lou has been exposed in her relationship with Alva. She is described as being “spellbound” when Alva “tell[s] [the] many tales of his life” (160). Alva even remarks to Emma Lou that he “wished someone would write a story of his life” (160). Alva’s comment has been largely ignored in interpretations of the novel.²⁴ Emma Lou surmises that Alva’s desire for a biography is the reason he keeps company with, what are to her, disappointing friends (160, 156). The fact that Alva is seeking after “*a* story of his life” as opposed to “*the* story of his life” is a subtle acknowledgment that, no matter what his friends or some other biographer might write, that construction would be simply that: a constructed version of Alva’s life, but not *the* ultimate version.

No matter how refreshingly destabilizing Alva’s perspective on identity might be, his progressive view of things does not translate into an acceptable life philosophy, and rather assists in continuing his and Emma Lou’s own unhealthy association. The text describes his story telling as a “one-sided conversational communion” that “strengthen[s] their physical bond,” making “Emma Lou more palatable to Alva” and “Alva a more glamorous figure to Emma Lou” (160). Similarly, in the frame tale of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazâd’s own story-telling, while an

inventive and clever method of perpetuating her existence, ultimately only serves to solidify her connection to a neurotic king. These two examples of story-telling (which are less than effective at offering true freedom to Emma Lou and Shahrazâd) illustrate the necessity of careful consideration of the purposes to which any critical theory is put. How useful is any identity, fluctuating or not, if it keeps one tethered to alcoholic parasites, jealous rulers, or oppressive nation-states?

Stars on Mount Olympus

A-nationalism as elucidated by material geography offers a useful alternative to transnational identity building because of its insensibility towards cultural boundaries of race and country. However, even as *The Blacker the Berry* supports a-nationalism as a critical framework, the material geography in the novel challenges any identity-building, whether based on transnationalism or a-nationalism, as being significant. Earlier on in the novel, after she has lived in Harlem for five weeks, Emma Lou awakens one morning feeling philosophical. She marvels that “only a few weeks before she had been over three thousand miles away,” surmising from this observation the following: “Time and distance—strange things, immutable, yet conquerable” (75). By considering time and distance immutable, Emma Lou has invoked the absolute space and time paradigm. Her preference becomes even more evident when she questions her ability to conquer time: “Hadn’t she read or heard somewhere that all things were subject to time, even God?” (75). The idea that God would be subject to time was an integral part of Newton’s theories of looking at the world, he believing God to be “inside a preexisting space and time, rather [than] the maker of spacetime through the creation of matter” (Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism* 137). Newton’s contemporary Leibniz strongly disagreed with Newton, arguing that “the absolute view diminished God’s stature” (137).

Even though Emma Lou's thought patterns are more closely aligned with Newton rather than Leibniz, Emma Lou still wonders if her removal from Boise to Harlem might indicate that she has conquered time. Her stream of consciousness leads her to remember a line from Countee Cullen's poetry collection of *Color*: "I run, but Time's abreast with me" (75). Emma Lou interprets Cullen's words as confirmation of her previous question: yes, all things are subject to time, even God, even celebrated poets. However, the poem in its entirety suggests that, while Cullen acknowledges that "Time will estrange/ The flesh from bone" (lines 19-20), he plans on conquering time through a different method. Cullen hopes for his collection to grant him immortality, imploring readers to "Turn to this book/ Of the singing me/ For a springtime look/ At the wintry tree" (89-92). For Cullen, to outrun or to conquer time is to cheat death by extending his presence on earth through his work, an idea that is best explained by the relational conception of spacetime because of Cullen's efforts to contain his future existence in a creation of the present, that is, his book of poems.

However, this relational method of conquering time is too far-reaching for Emma Lou's limited perspective, who is thinking in terms of only "a few weeks" rather than eternity (75), even though the geography around her suggests a longevity far exceeding her own existence. The Appalachian Mountains in New York first started forming approximately 450 million years ago, making them 380 million years older than the Rocky Mountain range from which Emma Lou has recently fled (Elias 5). But Emma Lou is not prone to depth or breadth of thinking,²⁵ and so rather than pursue any complex thoughts about time, she decides instead that "she had only traversed space and defied distance. This suggested a more banal, if a less arduous thought tangent" (75). Emma Lou's failure to fully contemplate the act of conquering time is reminiscent of another unsuccessful attempt at engaging the material world to defeat the temporal as

exhibited in “Stars.” Even though the poem’s speaker tries to pursue more arduous thoughts, she is still left with the “terse banality” that her efforts at making meaning finally signify nothing.

The coupling of Thurman’s poem with Emma Lou’s musings complicates Harvey’s claims that the relational concept of space is “vitally important” (Harvey, “Space” 277) and “is where the most interesting and contested meanings lie” (Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism* 148). When engaging with the material world in an effort to shore up relational connections, a more arduous thought tangent does not always uncover deeper meanings about life: the unresponsive earth can drain meaning from metaphor. Instead of suggesting new ways of thinking about identity that are not transnational, material geography can call into question the very act of identity building. But the fact that the material world is ultimately insensible to efforts of meaning making is not a weakness but a strength, in that it reminds us of our own fallible nature, and of the requirement of humility in negotiating the absolute, relative, and relational worlds around us and the identities that we form within them. As one mountaineer has observed, “Too often, it’s not the mountain’s harshness that kills climbers but their own hubris” (Jenkins).

Members of both the old and new guard of the New Negro era faced the extremely difficult task of trying to redefine the black image in a way that did not reify white culture or reinforce white prejudices. While the old and new guard disagreed about how such an image should be constructed, the implicit a-nationalism in some of their writings suggests an unacknowledged unity that existed between the two camps, a unity that in some cases seems to directly contradict the goals for defining what it meant (and means) to be black. I call for further investigation of the latent a-national strains in New Negro era texts in order to add increased nuance to an already complex period of history and further explore the difficult project of identity formation. Was it the influence of the material world that allowed Thurman to call for a

racial art but then also write of himself the following: “He was not interested in races or countries or people’s skin color. He was interested only in individuals, interested only in achieving his own salvation and becoming if possible a beacon light on Mount Olympus” (“Stepchild” 238).

Thurman’s hoped-for apotheosis most overtly refers to the dwelling place of the Greek gods. Yet there is another Mount Olympus with which Thurman would have most certainly been acquainted: almost due east of Salt Lake City sits a grand peak, named Mount Olympus after its Greek counterpart by the pioneers who first settled the valley (Wadley). In writing of these pioneers, Thurman references their association with “ore-laden mountains” (“Quoth” 87), and Mount Olympus has been cited as a “crucial source of minerals” for the early settlers (Wadley). ““But when the pioneers traded their picks and plows for pencils and paintbrushes,” one art historian has explained, “the true majesty of Mount Olympus came to light. The mountain was an undeniable source of artistic inspiration”” (Wadley). Mount Olympus’ material and metaphorical meaning to the human beings that have come into contact with it is indeed significant.

A recent exhibit featuring paintings of Mount Olympus also included a video presentation in which modern-day citizens of the Salt Lake Valley reminisced about Olympus’s impact on their lives, including “the commentary of a poet who was inspired by the peak” (Wadley). While a viewing of this film confirms that the quoted poet is not Thurman, it is possible that his scads of poetry were in fact produced in the foothills of Mount Olympus. Might not the “beacon light on Mount Olympus” be, instead of Thurman, the stars from his poem? The sparkling infinitudes above the mountain’s summit represent the material world’s insensibility towards racial distinction, and its resulting a-national affiliation. Wai Chee Dimock has described humankind’s

existence as “a sojourn marked by layers of relations” (Dimock, *Shades* 6). These layers of relations are enriched by viewing the material geography of the earth as not only holding metaphorical meaning but also as concrete matter with absolute and relative properties, properties that can reveal a view of humanity that is unencumbered by transnational paradigms too much connected to national agendas.

¹ The final line of “Stars” may in fact be an allusion to Macbeth’s famous soliloquy upon learning of the death of his wife: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (5.5.17-28).

² Anderson and Gilroy.

³ On diaspora, see Edwards 13 and Smith and Cohn 6; on imperialism in Latin America, see Stecopoulos 34-62; on islands, see Roberts 93.

⁴ Leigh Ann Lietwiller Berte has identified the practice of “geographical essentialism” epitomized by rail travel in the 1870s and 80s and its effect on perceptions of spatial geography and identity formation (172), and Wai Chee Dimock has recently introduced the concept of “the ‘deep time’ of the planet Earth as described by . . . geology and astronomy” in order to challenge recent societal actions that seem to be wholly focused on concerns involving national exceptionalism rather than international cooperation (*Continents* 6).

⁵ See Blum, Chambers, and Glissant.

⁶ Fluck 366; see also Traister 11 and Heyes.

⁷ See Fluck 366, 369-70 and Traister 3, 13.

⁸ Brian Roberts’ recently published article “Archipelagic Diaspora, Geographical Form, and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” proposes a similar project when he suggests that “the question of formal geography [attain] an interpretive weight that mirrors the heft typically afforded to cultural geography” (123). My argument is thus a further exploration of his suggestion.

⁹ Knadler 924; Jarraway 36; Ganter 85; Scott 326.

¹⁰ Harlem “sweetbacks” were men who involved themselves sexually with women in order to procure economic support (see van Notten 220-221).

¹¹ On geographical materialism and social theory, see Soja; on geographical materialism, space, and economics, see Sheppard and Barnes; on geographical materialism and deimperialization, see Chen.

¹² In fact, Harvey’s classification of space and time as absolute, relative, and relational falls (according to Harvey) into a first dimension; Harvey offers three additional categories for spatiality within a second dimension, the mechanics of which fall outside of the realm of this paper. For a discussion of spatiality in the second dimension, see *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* 141-144.

¹³ Obviously, the relative space-time paradigm reminds us that people will observe absolute characteristics of material geography differently; I am not arguing for a “correct” way of observing material characteristics, but instead the conscious presence of such observation.

¹⁴ Proulx 99; Brathwaite 1.

¹⁵ Silverstein 1; Rafferty 13; Stille 4.

¹⁶ Thurman’s declaration is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s call for “a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender *express nothing*” (530).

¹⁷ See van Notten pgs. 99-100, 113, 117.

¹⁸ See Gates and Jarrett 1-18.

¹⁹ Fluck 366; see also Traister 11 and Heyes.

²⁰ Once Weldon announces that he is going to become a Pullman porter and thus be gone from Boise indefinitely, Emma Lou instantly concludes that it is the darkness of her skin that ultimately kept their relationship from blossoming: “It never occurred to [Emma Lou] that the matter of her color had never once entered the mind of Weldon. Not once did she consider that he was acting toward her as he would have acted toward any girl under similar circumstances, whether her face had been white, yellow, brown, or black. Emma Lou did not understand that Weldon was just a selfish normal man and not a color-prejudiced one” (69).

Later, while living in Harlem, Emma Lou again misjudges a situation, with her misjudgment made openly apparent to the reader. Alva, the sweetback with whom Emma Lou becomes heavily involved, leads her to believe that she is attending a social event with him and some of his close friends, while in reality, Alva has agreed, at the request of a casual acquaintance, to escort a group of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and artists to a rent party so that they might find writing material. While Emma Lou interprets the invitation as conclusive evidence of Alva's love for her, readers are made painfully aware of Alva's true motivation: the experience will allay Emma Lou's fears that Alva doesn't take her to any parties with his friends because of the darkness of her skin when this is, in fact, the reason for Alva's reticence.

²¹ For further examples of Emma Lou's obliviousness to geographical features in favor of observing African American culture, see pgs. 35-6.

²² Scott 325; Jarraway 36; van Notten 234; Knadler 924-25; Ganter 83-104.

²³ It could also be argued that Ali Baba's ability to split open a mountain with only his words indicates a paradigm in which humankind subverts the material world and its subsequent theoretical power. Yet rather than Ali Baba making the earth subject to him, he is in fact subject to the material world. In order to harness its power, that is, enter inside of the mountain and find the wealth hidden within, he must use the correct language. Cassim's inability to exit the cave successfully is further evidence that the mountain yields only to the proper formula. Material geography only yields its best interpretations (its hidden wealth) when requisite attention is given to its material characteristics, best explored by thoroughly considering and applying different space and time conceptions.

²⁴ The one notable exception is Alva's comment being read as evidence that an inconspicuous "*character as narrator*" is dictating Emma Lou's story to us, this unobtrusive character being Truman Walter from the rent party (Roberts, "[Ex]Isles" 97).

²⁵ See footnote 3 for Wai Chee Dimock's description of the value of an elongated worldview.

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