Introduction: Utopia and Disenchantment

Richard Wright’s stories, novels, and autobiographical writings reveal a long pattern of hope and disappointment with alternative places set up as originally promising solutions to dystopian settings. Wright himself might be called a man of displacement, as lifelong hopes of finding a better place for his work, himself, and his family led him through a series of moves from Mississippi and Memphis to Chicago, then to New York, and from there to a residence in Paris punctuated by an aborted attempt to find greater freedom in London. His best-known works are often marked by similar patterns. His first published short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1938), describes a successful escape from a death-ridden South to a utopian North, while Black Boy (1945), again exploring the necessity of leaving the South, reveals his disappointment in Chicago as a utopian space. Various places in Wright’s fiction and nonfiction (Chicago, New York, Paris, Spain, or Ghana) reveal a repeated disenchantment with these imagined utopias. For Wright, as for his fictional characters, the US North and the East Coast, like Paris, proved illusory utopian destinations in a flight from social and finally political oppression, and Wright continued to be as critical of these places as he was of the South.

Wright’s The Long Dream (1958), his often under-examined, last published novel, is unique in his prose for relying on a utopian alternative place that remains undescribed, unachieved, and uneXperienced, thus lying beyond criticism. Much like today’s Occupy Movement, The Long Dream explicitly criticizes contemporary political, economic, and social organization by implying an implicit alternative, which remains ideal and averts criticism by the very fact that it remains undefined. The novel, depicting increasingly horrifying aspects of life for middle-class African Americans in the small-town South of the 1940s and 50s, suddenly reveals
Paris as an unexpected solution, allowing sudden and unexpected escape. For Fishbelly Tucker, Wright’s protagonist, unlike other fleeing characters in the novel who escape to Detroit, does not go North in the footsteps of the previous generation of Southern African Americans who mentor him but instead follows his peers, who have left the US for service in the army overseas. This in a sense is a movement less diachronic than synchronic, spatial more than evolutionary or generational. It is a movement, as Todorov once wrote of spatial relationships, less of logical causality than of “parallelism” (20; my translation). This article examines Fishbelly Tucker’s destination as an undescribed place, repeatedly defined in negative terms by all that it is not—a hopeful utopia that, to maintain its promise, must remain undescribed even as it is imagined.

As a fictional setting, Paris had already offered some five generations of American writers a spatial framework for exotic extra-national scenarios like those depicted in Washington Irving’s Tales of a Traveler (1824) and Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin detective stories (1841-44). It was later the setting for anti-Bildungsromane like Henry James’s The American (1876-77) and The Ambassadors (1903), Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises (1926), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night (1934), Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood (1936), Gore Vidal’s The Judgment of Paris (1952), and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room (1956). Whether utopian or dystopic, Paris’s landscape was marked in such fictions as a semiological landscape of social and cultural meanings and connections, unmappable within familiar American spaces. Paris offered and invited one into a space in which not only social and cultural but also racialized identity found no direct translation, however rough, to those laid out by American space. Yet while for fictional European-American protagonists connections with Paris had often implied eerily historical ties to a personal past or future, in African-American fiction, Paris, particularly in the case of Wright’s The long Dream, might be seen as more symbolic of America’s own future.
PLACE AND SPACE IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S THE LONG DREAM presents itself in the closing scenes of The Long Dream, not as the most obvious choice for an alternative space outside a nightmarish America but rather as a generational choice.

By the end of the First World War, some 200,000 African-American servicemen had served in France, many returning from Paris with tales of an exotic city where people of any skin color had equal access to housing, public transportation, hotels, restaurants, and theaters, a city where interracial dating hardly raised eyebrows and where freedom from physical and psychological harassment offered a standard of living most had never experienced or even imagined in the US. Throughout the 1920s, a more or less tight-knit community of former soldiers stayed. The Second World War brought a second wave of American GI visitors and a tide of Americans drawn to Paris for its relative racial equality, for its reputation as a haven for artists and writers, and by the dollar’s revived postwar rise against the French franc. By 1946, Wright himself was one of a group of American expatriates in the city who had found a home there.

Wright’s working title for The Long Dream, “Mississippi,” implies a concern with place from the start. Life in fictional Clintonville, the novel’s Mississippi setting, a medium-sized, mid-century city, two-thirds white and one-third Black, is presented as a closed circuit in which even elements seemingly in opposition turn out to be in league together. Church and state, white and Black governance, criminality and the police, adulterous husbands and complicit wives, prostitutes and the men who seek to lead them out of prostitution with money itself earned from prostitution: They all form a well-oiled system where apparent antipodes complicitly feed off each other in an endless cycle. Each new solution or suggestion of escape is quickly revealed to be simply another organ in the main mechanism of corruption. At very few points is any “outside” to this closed system suggested at all in the novel, making the protagonist’s flight to Paris almost a surprise at its conclusion. Yet what surprises most about The Long Dream is how little Europe is referenced as an alternative to this closed system of corruption and acquiescence to corruption.

Highlights of the points where Wright even marginally foreshadows Paris as a solution to this space the novel sets up, some of which are textual and some thematic clues, are meager but might include the displaced, mismatched lines of an actor in a minstrel show the protagonist visits as a child: “I’m taking a long drive into a yellow gal to meet a country” (The
Long Dream emphasizes, by a seemingly nonsensical reversal, a priority of place over character. Or the protagonist’s hiding of checks behind a brick in the fireplace (and his father’s “hiding” of checks from the police by actually leaving one out in the open to be discovered) hold echoes of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (another American text set in Paris where a solution is hidden in plain sight, again with links to a fireplace). Or the juxtaposition of the words “ruefully” and “street” as the characters discuss Paris. Though while picking at textual hints of Wright’s conclusion might be interesting, it might prove more fruitful to approach the novel through the lens of theory on place and space to see what Wright, writing this narrative set in America from Paris, might be implicitly saying about the space of America he had by that time rejected, and what he suggests as alternatives to that space, or to any other space susceptible to eventual corruption and criticism.

Place and Space in Wright’s Clintonville

“Narrative structures,” Michel de Certeau wrote, “regulate changes in space” through “places put in linear or interlaced series” (The Practice 115). By giving values to topographical points within the textual space of a narrative, authors create differentiated centers of value within it. Because Wright’s novel deals so much with critiquing space by intimating that Clintonville’s problems can only be solved by the protagonist’s removal to a separate place outside it, and because Paris is referenced mainly as an absence, a lack, and an unformed and unnamed dream, it is useful to examine the book’s other absences, linking these to the idea of absence in a Freudian/Lacanian sense. If utopia is a state of sufficiency (whether material, emotional, or political), Wright’s dystopic South is predicated on lack, and his readings of Freud bring him, time and again, to associate this lack with missing figures in the essential Lacanian/Freudian triangle of the nuclear family, as well as in the sexual imagery giving rise to Fishbelly’s own name.

Wright’s novel repeatedly shows absence linked to loss rather than to that which is simply as yet undiscovered. It is entirely likely that if Wright had not already made a disillusioning trip to Africa in 1953, five years prior to The Long Dream’s publication, Africa itself might have been presented as the “absent lost” object of desire, just as Europe often was for his European-American compatriots. Instead absence in the book seems to
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dangle between being that which remains undiscovered and that which is constantly symbolized as the known which has been lost. While the title Wright finally chose for the novel would seem to mark life in America as an unreal dream, his work implicitly highlights Paris as another. What the novel’s protagonist lacks is something he has never had. Clintonville, his home, is a space of intersecting powers, while what he longs for is an originally unimaginable but progressively figuralized place outside this space—a place which is a solution by the very reason that it is not a space, but instead it is a fixed point of negatively defined meaning. The novel’s message repeatedly indicates that all spaces will eventually be discovered to be contaminated spaces by the very reason of their being, as de Certeau explains, “practiced.”

De Certeau’s delineations of “place” and “space” deserve further explanation here before we go on: A place “is the order [... ] in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence,” which excludes “the possibility of two things being in the same location (place).” A place has “its own ‘proper’ and distinct location, a location it defines,” and “implies an indication of stability.” A space, meanwhile, “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.” Composed of “intersections of mobile elements,” space is “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.” It is, in effect, place put into practice (The Practice 117). If Clintonville and America more generally fit neatly into de Certeau’s category of a space in the novel (an unstable space of intersecting actors and socio-economic powers which are mobile, interchangeable, and even omnipresent), and Paris likewise figures as a place (coexisting, yet distinct and stable), what might it mean that, while space is progressively more clearly defined over the course of the novel, place itself remains undefined and obscured? Had Wright’s outlook on life led him to view all potentially stable value markers as fluctuating, unstable spaces? Certainly in his final writings, the coexistence of narrative elements appears diagnostically unstable, and the appearance of spies and double agents in his last completed novel, the unpublished sequel “Island of Hallucination,” suggests the idea of opposing forces (or sets of intentions) occupying the same location or character. Little in this last novel is as stable as in his earlier writings (Fabre 483), and the America of The Long Dream offers a foretaste of this state of
events. Yet with its sequel still unpublished over fifty years after Wright’s death, the novel’s nebulous Paris still holds an ambiguous promise.

The Long Dream, much like Marcel Proust’s Du côté de chez Swann, opens with a young protagonist sent to bed, unable to sleep as he waits for the return of an absent parent—here not the mother but the father. Young Rex—whose name itself forces an Oedipal reference on the reader—asks his mother to leave the light on while he sleeps. To say that Paris is after all the city of light might be stretching the connection, but reference to a desire for light in connection with the first female figure in the child’s life is not, especially as Rex immediately shows an interest in how his father, off night fishing, is fishing in the dark by using a flashlight. Of course once we know what Tyree, his father, regularly does with his light-skinned lover when he leaves the house at night, the reference becomes clearer. Tyree, says his mother, uses a flashlight, this phallic object whose power is to make one’s path or one’s prey visible by lightning darkness. So separated from both father and mother by darkness, Rex has no choice but to sleep and to dream, and he wakes to daylight and his father, who by morning is bringing home not only fish but also with them Rex’s new nickname, Fishbelly. Wright could hardly have underlined his intentional use of Freudian theory more clearly than by first naming his protagonist after Oedipus’s own title. Yet upturning the most basic Lacanian theory, the father here is not the representative of language, naming, and the symbolic (and the symbol is always symbolic not of the object it ostensibly makes reference to, but of that object’s absence)—this position is given to Rex’s peers. While the father provides the material object from which Rex takes his new name, “Fishbelly,” it is his peers who will later rename him.

Elizabeth Yukins has described Wright’s previous works as showing a “pattern of black paternal absence” (746). But the final object of curiosity and of desire for Rex is neither the father’s return, nor the mother’s presence, but the white interior of the fish, which both explains the father’s absence and symbolizes the place he has been. The sexual metaphor of the fish, signaling “associations with female genitalia” (Yukins 750; see Hakutani) has been noted, but what seems more essential is the fact that it is presented in the book’s opening scene as something both recovering and representing absence, and that the fish’s own presence can be called forth both by Rex’s dreams (for he had nightmares about fish) and by his waking from them. So the novel opens with two settings: one real and darkened
where a mother turns out the light and closes the door on her child, and the other a dream of rejoining the father through a connection with the white-fleshed animal which has caused his absence.

The second reference to a place outside the protagonist’s world comes up in a conversation with his peers some pages later. Although we know that the family reads newspapers and that Fishbelly’s early childhood takes place during the Second World War, the first reference to a world outside America is to Africa, when one of his companions questions him:

“Fish, you want to go to Africa?”

Fishbelly winced, looking from black face to black face.

“Huh! To Africa?” Fishbelly asked. “What for?”

Zeke and Tony stomped their feet with glee. Sam scowled.

“I told you!” Zeke screamed triumphantly.

“Fish, you sure looked funny when you heard that word ‘Africa’!” Tony whooped.

“But who’s going to Africa?” Fishbelly asked, seeking the point of the debate.

“Nobody but damn fools!” Zeke said emphatically. (The Long Dream 32)

Here and in the boys’ ensuing conversation, the first reference to a place outside Clintonville is described as a dead end, a place representative of a heritage not romantically better than their present home but shamefully worse. “Papa said we all fighting that Hitler and that’s a white man’s war and we black folks ought to be helping Africa —” (33), exclaims one of his young friends, to which Fishbelly mumbles, “All I know about Africa’s what I read in the geography book at school,” [ ... ] unwilling to commit himself” (35). As Yukins has pointed out, “white authority” in the novel is dependent on “written markers of control, such as bank notes, checks, and other economic and legal papers” (74 7). A distrust is implied here of the symbolic order of language (what is read), but also of parentage, as the children overwhelmingly refuse Africa as an object of desire or nostalgia, an historical landscape as Sam says where “your mama’s mama’s mama and your papa’s papa’s papa come from” (The Long Dream 34). Almost invoked in this children’s discourse that Wright underlines as markedly “infantile” is de Certeau’s “vocal utopia” of glossolalia, an attempt at making sense outside proscribed hegemonic sense by speaking in tongues.

This is, for Fishbelly, a breakthrough, even if it is a refutation of doxa by the frustratingly unspeakable.
With this first reference to a world outside America—presented not as an alternative to life in the US but in largely negative tones—Fishbelly goes home and for the first time sleeps with the lights on, as he had first wished to do as a child. The obvious metaphor of the light here is the actualization of the message his friend Sam has just preached—by realizing his own oppression, he becomes "enlightened:" "When you know you a nigger, then you ain’t no nigger no more," Sam has already reasoned. "You start being a man!"

Fishbelly, returning home, gropes through his dark bedroom. Without turning on the light, he stands "breathing heavily in the warm darkness, snared by an anguish that he could not understand," then snaps the light on to stare "openmouthed at the reflection of his tear-stained black face in the mirror," grimacing at his reflection before spitting on the glass. "‘Nigger,’ he whispers to himself before throwing himself into bed to lie ‘trembling for a long time,’ finally falling "into a deep sleep, oblivious of the burning light" (37). Fishbelly, however clumsily and unknowingly, has attained the power (with the absence of his parents, who are both away that night) to remove the absence symbolized by the darkness through his own will. It is the absence of the mother that enables this power to bring about the presence of the object of desire (or at least the symbol of its presence). Her not being present allows him in other words to control a symbol previously linked to the father (the light) which now illuminates his own reflection.

The theme of the absence of and desire for light reappears next when vigilantes invade the family’s neighborhood and Fishbelly, "grop[e] unconsciously for the electric switch" in the darkened house, this time only to have his hand slapped by his father (66). It is first the mother, then the father, who forbids him to turn on the light. The home is, by parental edict, left in darkness, and soon will come his father’s insistent command that Fishbelly stay away from white women. This command is only an echo of the larger edict: The choice of "turning on the light" and its links to geographic displacement is the larger, overriding symbol of the two, and a symbol that can only be realized by a rejection of the parents and of the home. The "real world," Fishbelly muses on this same night, is not a world one can reach through a return to an African past; it is "over there somewhere" (67; emphasis in original). The "over there" of Wright’s phrase, echoing the chorus of a popular American wartime song about
Europe, hints momentarily that it might be the other side of Clintonville while leaving the place ambiguous. As Fishbelly reasons,

the real reality of the lives of his people was negated; the real world lay over there somewhere— in a place where white people lived, people who had the power to say who could or could not live and on what terms, and the world in which he and his family lived was a kind of shadow world. (The Long Dream 67)

Yet the novel quickly makes clear that the other side of Clintonville holds no solutions for Fishbelly or his family and companions.

**Escape and its Discontents**

What may have been behind some of the criticism leveled at Wright's novel at the time it appeared was that the imagined solution to the social, political, and economic problems of Clintonville does not assume the form of political action, organized protest, or social change but of movement to a new space, expatriation—an accusation also leveled at Wright himself by activists in the US as the Civil Rights Movement developed (Reilly, Redding, Ford). Even after his first relatively minor scrapes with Clintonville's racism, Fishbelly's reaction is a wish for escape through physical displacement: "Oh, if only he could flee to some place where he was not known, where people would accept him [...]! It was the first time that such a thought had entered his head and it frightened him" (The Long Dream 131). He will, of course. Yet while the idea of flight is both daring and frightening, the idea of protest remains off the table; it is not even considered as an option.

As Fishbelly grows older and his fortunes become more clearly linked to those of his father, Clintonville is revealed as an increasingly and inescapably complex web of interactions between its powerbrokers. Meanwhile his friends leave for the army and Europe, and Fishbelly asks where they expect to end up:

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1 All three, Reilly, Redding, and Ford, repeat Wright's critics' and peers' accusations that he had abandoned the US Civil Rights Movement by choosing to remain in Paris.
"Don't know. Mebbe Germany. Mebbe France," Tony said.

"We'll git a chance to go to Paris, mebbe," Zeke opined.

"I done heard of that cool town," Fishbelly sighed.

"Man, they say the wine's bitter and the women's sweet in Paris," Zeke smiled.

"They say they don't bother colored folks there," Tony said.

"Damn! Ain't no place like that in this whole world," Fishbelly mumbled, laughing ruefully.

"They say in Paris white folks and black folks walk down the street together," Tony sang in a tone of frightened hope.

"I ain't going to believe that till I see it," Zeke said. (The Long Dream 254; emphasis in original)

Again as in the boys’ first tepidly probing discussion of Europe, verbal reports of foreign space are mistrusted, and we might remember that language itself is the symbolic territory of the Lacanian father. Only sight, image itself, substantiates. Image as opposed to language is traditionally linked to the Lacanian figure of the mother. Yet when his father is killed, allowing Fishbelly to take his place, his mother, appearing immediately on the scene after an extended period of absence from the plot, angrily refuses his embrace, turning instead to their pastor (302). The church (as in the episode of his childhood pneumonia, when he is burned while his mother goes off to church) has already become a surrogate Oedipal father figure. If adults in this novel are slippery characters, configurations between adult and child characters are murky. Just when Fishbelly seems to have slotted them into their familiar Freudian pigeonholes, they are transformed or removed to be immediately replaced by other figures. The only characters who can really be trusted are those of Fishbelly’s peers, who never shift in their roles as actors and are rarely shown interacting with the space of Clintonville at all (preferring its outlying abandoned fields, disused nighttime roads, or the temporary, heterotopic space of a visiting carnival). It is they too who (notably) finally do place themselves geographically outside Clintonville and outside the US; they are the only characters described as doing so.

Meanwhile displacement is, for Fishbelly, an unobvious and last resort decision, seemingly unimaginable up to the moment the decision is made, even as Wright slowly and hesitantly sets Paris up for the reader as a logical final solution to a place where the African-American characters’ time is
“spent frenziedly within the life area mapped out by white men” (265). Fishbelly tries to will himself as far away from this sodden hopelessness as possible. But the moment his mind tried to embrace the idea of something different, it went blank. He had heard of Jews wandering from nation to nation, of refugees roaming the face of the earth, but black folks remained in the same spot in peace and war, in summer and winter. (265)

“Better to flee to some other spot on the earth’s surface than let that overtake him,” he thinks. “But where? He grows confused, trying to solve a problem about which he could hardly think” (277). This hopeless search for a place outside has already been suggested.

The naked fact was that there was nothing left for them but flight. Tyree (Fishbelly’s father) should stall for time, sell his property, and go away. Where? South? No. He could be extradited. Then maybe to a foreign country where people spoke another language, ate other foods, had alien habits. But such a world was beyond Fish’s imagination. (259)

Wright sets Paris up partly as a solution to a legal problem emerging from the family’s involvement in various elements of the town’s intricate mesh of well-organized control and to a legal problem whose roots lie in the law of the father himself—both Fishbelly’s own and the patriarchal figures of white power that are finally revealed as manipulating him.

The temptations to give in to the Oedipal urge, to remove the obstacle of the lawgiving father by (re)placing him, come with repeated force toward the novel’s conclusion. Just before leaving for the scene of his own death, Fishbelly’s father lingers to insert “a fresh cigar into his mouth” (289)—stepping toward his death, carrying away the ultimate Freudian phallic symbol after which the chief of police urges Fishbelly to “[t]ake it [his father’s murder] the right way and settle down and you can take up where Tyree left off . . .” (300). Fishbelly/Rex, meditating on this, imagines “stepping into Tyree’s shoes” (301). The standard solution to the Oedipal drive of replacing the father by assuming a similar stance is clear, yet when his mother arrives at the scene of the murder and Fishbelly, having just witnessed his father’s death, rushes forward to embrace her, she recoils to be embraced instead by the local minister. Likewise the
"adult" desire to imitate the father by finding a substitute mother-wife is also thwarted by the novel’s plot. Rex’s own girlfriend has been consumed in the flames of his father’s neglected dance hall, and Tyree’s mistress Gloria has meanwhile taken up with Tyree’s business partner. In spite of these obstacles, the traditional Oedipal passing on of the parental phallus is attempted as Rex, his father now dead and the police and governance of the town urging him to assume charge of the town’s underground economy, feels inside his coat pocket “the thick, white envelope that Tyree had given him that morning [before his death].” “Papa left me in charge, and, goddammit, I’m going to take charge and all hell ain’t going to stop me!” Finally he will seek a new way to escape this Oedipal solution—a way not involved in the spatial exchange of positions within an already fixed frame of meaning, but in his own removal to a place outside the triangulating web Wright’s Freudian drama presents.

Fishbelly’s urge to take his father’s place has already been counterbalanced by his mother’s rejection and her turn to the church. As if to reiterate this, even the songs sung by the church choir at his father’s funeral drop subtle hints, first seemingly calling Rex away from stepping “into this father’s shoes,” then seeming to indicate that to avoid replacing the father means going on his own journey of physical displacement to find his father:

And there may be no sadness of farewell
When I embark;
For though from out our house of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.  ... (The Long Dream 321)

There’s a land that is airer than day
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father wails over the way,
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

We shall meet on that beautiful shore.  ... (326; emphasis in original)
The words stand out even more clearly once separated from the familiar music; not only has Tyree prepared Fishbelly’s way, financially and career­wise (in “Island of Hallucination,” we find Fishbelly again working as a pimp in Paris, much as his father had in Clintonville), but also as an Oedipal model, the “Father” who “waits over the way,” “on that beautiful shore.”

Meanwhile his peers urge him to leave while noting that France is not ideal but simply a better solution. “France ain’t no heaven, but folks don’t kill you for crazy things. These white folks more like real human beings than them crackers back there in Mississippi” (372), Fishbelly’s friend Zeke optimistically writes from Europe. Finally, words are to be trusted—not the words in a geography book, but the words of the known peer-group eye-witness, who Police Chief Cantley links Fishbelly with during his interrogations by calling him part of a “new generation” of Blacks.

Meanwhile the police chief, having read Zeke’s letters, makes a statement that is not necessarily contradictory when urging Fishbelly to stay: “Those French are dirty” (374). Fishbelly, whose first run-in with the police comes from having a mud-fight with his friends, takes off after his confinement in prison, following his friends again to the land of people who may be “dirty,” but who are “real human beings.” Having already chosen the name his peers give him over that given at birth, he chooses to follow them, boarding a plane for Paris. Wright concludes his escape however with an unsettling ending. Seated on his east-bound plane beside a white non-Southerner, who suggests that whites in the American South must be “pretty hard” on his “people,” Fishbelly, “with quiet heat” in a misplaced fit of local pride, brushes off the comment: “That ain’t true [...] We live just like anybody else” (380). As Satya P. Mohanty asks, “[a]re our efforts to make objective value judgments always thwarted by our own political interests or our cultural and social perspectives?” (803), or indeed by those who have built the systems within which we have been formed and of which we have become parts?

A major question remains toward The Long Dream’s conclusion: Why does Wright’s narrative completely skip any description of New York, even though Wright has his protagonist wait there for two weeks for the plane that takes him to Paris? Why not, given his legal problems, escape to Canada, which had served well enough for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s protagonists who fled slavery a century before? Other characters involved
in the scandal that finally precipitates Fishbelly's flight from Clintonville escape to Detroit, and though Fishbelly is only seventeen years old, they never suggest he follow them (The Long Dream 310). One might imagine a flight to Paris was chosen because Wright had already written a story of flight from the South to the North and planned a sequel to The Long Dream set in Paris, where he had already lived now for twelve years. But by that line of argument, why start with the South at all? Was it to provide the ultimate contrast of spaces, a melodrama that could only be evoked by the juxtapositioning of completely "opposite" spaces? Or perhaps because for this "new kind of nigger" as Police Chief Cantley calls Fishbelly of African Americans in the 1950s, the steps toward the measure of equality northern US cities offered finally seemed only that—steps—and no longer the ideals they had once represented to the generation before.

Conclusion

Wright, by the late 1950s a well-traveled author with international connections and a broad view of the world, attempted to broaden the African-American imagination's polarization of the world from an American North and South to a transatlantic East and West, offering a wider spectrum of equality by underlining that in postwar America, North and South had become interconnected parts and partners of a single overarching web-like system of social and political suppression. Naturally he had in mind not only an audience of men and women in contemporary Mississippi still suffering injustices—or indeed horrors—similar to those described in his novel, but also Civil Rights supporters in both the North and the South who believed they had answers to America's problems of inequality. Indeed the sequel to his novel surely targeted European intellectuals, Black and white, who themselves imagined that European tolerance (or communist ideology) offered hope for a more egalitarian world. But this more equal world, both The Long Dream and Wright's last novel suggest, is a utopian place which must be kept alive as a dream, avoiding complete definition. Space, the world we live in, is always "practiced place" (de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life 117). The Long Dream allows us to imagine a place which cannot be practiced and thus cannot disappoint because it remains a dream.
Clintonville begins for Fishbelly as an unknown space, the places within it repeatedly linked to absence. Yet as Wright unfolds his setting's elements (and it takes almost the entire novel to familiarize us with its various interlocking structures), each place within it is revealed as uncannily familiar, a repetition of the same structure on a new socio-economic plane. All places inside this space are finally linked to the father, even in his absence. The space of Clintonville opposed to the place of Paris disappears as Fishbelly sets his sights on France. After all whether an imagined notion or a nation itself, place is always only space endowed with a certain value, value's own geographic concretization (Tuan), be it that of an individual writer, his critics, or a nation. Places, these holders of value, once arrived at become spaces themselves where dreams and symbols play out their stories while referencing other value-laden places outside themselves. Narratives, like human interactions, while relying on the notion of place for meaning, can only be played out in space, and Paris itself in Wright's next novel, dissolves from being a singular value to yet another space in which a range of values clash. Racism, and even racialism may be left behind by the lucky few. But once one arrives at that longed-for shore, their value breaks apart into a series of intersecting socio-political elements, less blatantly undemocratic but no less insidious. Once arrived at, places—real or imaginary, holders of symbolic values and dreams—expand into spaces where familiar characters play out familiar stories in new guises. Wright's own journey toward an ephemeral, ever-receding freedom surely taught him as much.

The conclusion of Wright's novel, showing Fishbelly on an airplane mid-Atlantic between two worlds, preserves that last, good place by leaving it undefined and unimaginable, yet real as a mappable absence. As Mohanty writes on an idea coming out of Michel Foucault's 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, objectivity can only be imagined as the departure from all cultural references. While one might imagine such a space as Wright's mid-Atlantic airstream as being a spot on the globe between national and cultural borders, a smooth space devoid of signifiers, there is no hope of transcending ideology, for it rests not only in space but in the self (Mohanty 803). This is precisely Fishbelly's problem in the unpublished sequel to Wright's novel, “Island of Hallucination.” The Long Dream, at least until its sequel is released for publication by his estate, still offers hope for a fantastic escape from an unjust system that straites,
controls, and irrigates every possible point within its reach, pointing urgently to a better world outside our own, which remains always perhaps by definition undefined.

Works Cited


