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LANDSCAPE AS ETHICAL TERRITORY: ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP IN THE POETRY OF JUDITH WRIGHT

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Keywords	***Abstract***
Ecocriticism: Land ethics, Australian poetry, Postcolonial ecology, Environmental stewardship.	Judith Wright's poetry does something most nature writing never quite manages: it makes the land morally demanding. This paper argues that across poems like "South of My Days, ""Bora Ring,"" Lyrebird," and "Dust," Wright turns the Australian landscape into ethical ground — not a backdrop or a metaphor, but the source of obligations that human beings are answerable to. Reading her through Val Plumwood's ecological animism, Robin Wall Kimmerer's grammar of animacy, and postcolonial ecology, the paper shows that Wright was practising a form of ecocriticism decades before anyone named the field.

1. INRODUCTION

Judith Wright (1915–2000) wasn't just a poet. She was a conservationist who co-founded the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, a campaigner who spent decades fighting for the Great Barrier Reef and against the clearing of native bushland, and eventually a fierce advocate for Aboriginal land rights — a cause she came to see as inseparable from the environmental one. She wrote more than a dozen poetry collections. But the more you read her work, the harder it becomes to file her neatly under any single heading.Here's what critics have tended to do with Wright: they read her early poems as a kind of lyric nationalism — a settler poet trying to forge an authentic connection with an alien landscape — and her later work as the disappointed aftermath when that

project failed. This paper thinks that reading misses something fundamental. Wright's engagement with landscape was ethical from the very beginning, not just aesthetic. The land in her poetry isn't a territory to be claimed or admired. It's an interlocutor. A witness. And, crucially, a judge.That matters for how we place Wright within ecocriticism's intellectual history. She was writing about deep time, species vulnerability, colonial guilt, and the ethics of belonging decades before the field formalised those concerns. She's not a precursor to ecocriticism — she's one of its most rigorous practitioners, working in a form that refuses to separate environmental destruction from political and historical injustice

2. THE PASTORAL INHERITANCE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Wright was born on Walla Mumbi Station in New England, New South Wales, into a pastoral family whose history in the region went back to the 1830s. She never tried to escape that inheritance, but she never let it off the hook either. "South of My Days" (1946) is the poem where this tension is most visible. Wright is listening to the old drover Dan's stories of the tablelands, and from the first lines you can feel the double register: nostalgia for the heroic pastoral myth, and a quiet alertness to everything that myth has buried.

"South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite—"(Collected Poems-19)

That word "wincing" is doing a lot of work. The landscape is not just observed — it's attributed a capacity for pain. Wright isn't anthropomorphising in the cheap sense; she's not projecting feelings onto rocks. She's doing something subtler: installing within the landscape a vulnerability that makes the speaker's relationship to it a relationship of care, or its absence. This is the same ontological move that Val Plumwood would later call "animate earth" — the idea that nature isn't passive matter waiting for human beings to give it meaning, but an active, responsive presence in its own right.

The pastoral vision in the poem is complicated by Dan's stories, which romanticise the drover's life in the language of masculine heroism. Wright renders them with genuine warmth — she's not dismissive — but she frames them within a landscape that predates and will outlast them. The land is indifferent to the heroics performed on it. And the poem's final movement, "lean over me," suggests that the land's relationship to the speaker is less a comfort than a weight. The myth survives, but its ecological foundations are shown to be precarious.

"Bullocky," from the same collection, works a parallel but darker vein. The bullock driver is figured as a Moses of the Australian interior, with "vine-leaves in his hair" evoking both Dionysiac frenzy and Biblical deliverance. The poem captures the millennialism of the early settlers — that sense of being agents in a providential history of land-making. Then the final stanza lands:

"O vine, grow close upon that bone

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And hold it with your rooted hand.
The prophet Moses feeds the grape,
And fruitful is the Promised Land".(Collected Poems-17)

The "promised land" isn't given to the settler — it's branded onto his skeleton. It's not a gift but a mark, possibly of guilt, possibly of a belonging that is also a sentence. The fiery brand collapses the Mosaic covenant, the pioneer's sense of divine mandate, and the act of branding livestock — the routine instrumentalization of living beings — into a single image. Wright admires the bullocky's endurance even as she exposes the ideology that sustained him.

3. COLONIAL GUILT AND THE SILENCED COUNTRY

"Bora Ring" and "Nigger's Leap, New England"

If the pastoral poems interrogate settler triumphalism through the land as moral witness, the colonial poems make the ethical demand impossible to ignore. "Bora Ring" and "Nigger's Leap, New England" are among the earliest Australian poems to reckon directly with the violence of dispossession — and they do it, characteristically, through landscape. The land becomes the repository of what has been destroyed and the site from which accusation is issued.

"Bora Ring" (1946) opens with the loss of ceremonial place as a simultaneous ecological and cultural extinction:

"The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale." (Collected Poems- 7)

What's striking here is Wright's understanding that cultural annihilation and ecological loss are structurally the same event. The song and the dance and the story aren't lost because they've been forgotten — they're lost because the community that enacted them has been destroyed. But they're "secret with the dancers in the earth" — interred with the dead, embedded in the country itself. The ritual hasn't simply vanished; it's been rendered functionless by a displacement so total that the land no longer has human interlocutors who can receive what it holds.

The poem ends with the speaker standing in the ring as an inadequate witness: "Only the grass stands up / to mark the dancing-ring." Wright positions settler consciousness — including her own — as unable to fully read the landscape, as occupying country it cannot properly inhabit. This isn't sentimental lament. It's a structural observation: colonial dispossession has made authentic settler belonging impossible, because that belonging was built on the destruction of the belonging that preceded it.

"Nigger's Leap, New England" is starker still. Written about the site of a massacre — a cliff from which Aboriginal people were driven to their deaths — the poem enacts the effort of the settler imagination to reckon with inherited violence it cannot undo:

"Never from earth again the coolamon
Or thin black children dancing like the shadows

Of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh
Scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.
Night floods us suddenly as history."(Collected Poems- 16)

The darkness here is moral rather than astronomical. It's a darkness that has been made, not given, and it saturates the environment. The phrase "grappled to the earth" implies that the speaker cannot achieve the aesthetic distance that would allow comfortable pastoral contemplation. The earth holds her the way guilt holds — inescapably, physically, as a weight rather than a dwelling.

Together, these two poems constitute something remarkable in mid-twentieth century Australian poetry: an acknowledgement that the land is haunted, that settler culture is not the primary story of its formation, and that the poet's task is to make this haunting visible rather than paper over it with national myth. Wright anticipates what postcolonial theorists would call the "palimpsest" of colonial space — and does so without any theoretical scaffolding at all.

4. SPECIES LOSS AND THE ETHICS OF WITNESS

"Lyrebird,""Extinct Birds," and "Dust"

Wright's engagement with ecological crisis becomes most acute in the poems concerned with extinction and habitat loss. These aren't elegies in the conventional sense — she's not simply mourning what's gone. They constitute an ethics of witnessing in which the poet's obligation is to refuse the consolations that allow destruction to continue. "Lyrebird,""Extinct Birds," and "Dust" represent three registers of this refusal: what remains, what has been lost, and where things are heading.

"Lyrebirds" is one of Wright's most formally accomplished poems, and its formal complexity is inseparable from its ecological argument. The lyrebird's song — its extraordinary mimicry of the forest soundscape — is presented as a kind of living archive, a single creature carrying within itself the multiplicity of a whole community of sound:

"Ten years, and I have never gone.
I'll never go.
I'll never see the lyrebirds—
The few, the shy, the fabulous,
The dying poets." (Collected Poems-164)

If the lyrebird dies, all the voices it has absorbed and reproduced die with it. Wright understands, intuitively, what ecologists would later articulate as the concept of a keystone species — a creature whose presence or absence structures the entire community around it. But her concern isn't taxonomic; it's moral. The lyrebird's performance is, in her rendering, an act of fidelity — to the forest, to the community of sound, to a world that has made it what it is.

"Extinct Birds" extends this logic into elegy. Charles Harpur, the nineteenth-century colonial poet, had written of birds "long vanished from our day." Wright's poem picks up his lines and asks what it means to elegise a creature that no longer exists. What words can adequately mark the permanent disappearance of an entire species?

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"Charles Harpur in his journals long ago
(written in hope and love, and never printed)
Recorded the birds of his time's forest—
Described in copperplate on unread pages." (Collected Poems-167)

The poem achieves something environmental rhetoric rarely manages: accuracy without rhetoric, devastation without melodrama. The line "We have ended what we find" is simultaneously a statement of fact and a statement of guilt. The possessive pronoun matters: not "they" — colonists, hunters, developers — but "we." Wright implicates herself and her reader in the structure of destruction. And the phrase "what we find" quietly opens a question about what it means to "find" something already present, already alive, already embedded in its own relationships. To find is not to create; to end what you find is to exercise a power over pre-existing existence that demands ethical scrutiny.

"Dust" is Wright's most concentrated meditation on ecological collapse. The poem imagines the topsoil — the biological skin of a continent — being stripped away by overclearing and overgrazing:

"Dust has overtaken our dreams that were
Wider and richer than wheat under the sun
And war's eroding gale scatters our sons
With a million other grains of dust." (Collected Poems-23)

The pastoral language of sowing and harvest has been ironised; the wind is the only farmer now, and what it reaps is nothing. Wright deploys the vocabulary of agrarian productivity to expose the sterility that agrarian overuse has produced. The soil that "was once" life-giving has been reduced to dust — not merely a depleted resource, but a living system that has been killed.

5. ECOCRITICAL FRAMEWORKS AND WRIGHT'S CONTRIBUTION

Contemporary ecocriticism offers several frameworks that illuminate Wright's ecological poetics. Val Plumwood's concept of "ecological animism" — the recognition that non-human nature is agentive, communicative, and morally considerable — resonates with Wright's consistent attribution of something like interiority to landscape. Robin Wall Kimmerer's "grammar of animacy," developed from Potawatomi linguistic structures that treat non-human entities as animate subjects rather than passive objects, illuminates Wright's formal practice: her consistent choice of active verbs for landscape phenomena, her reluctance to use the language of resource or scenery, her sense that the land speaks even when — especially when — it is silent.

But Wright's position isn't simply that nature is alive in a way that demands reverence. It's that the history of how settler Australians have treated nature has foreclosed the possibility of innocent relationship. The land is a moral territory not only because it is alive but because it has been wronged — and the wrong done to it is inseparable from the wrong done to the peoples whose relationship to country was the primary casualty of colonisation.

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This is what distinguishes Wright from the British nature poetry tradition that shaped her early formation. For Wordsworth, nature is ultimately a resource for the development of the human moral imagination — it educates, chastens, and elevates the self. For Wright, nature is the subject of a moral drama that isn't primarily about the self at all. The land doesn't exist to improve the poet; the poet exists, in some sense, to answer to the land. That reversal — of the conventional human-nature hierarchy — is Wright's most radical and most distinctive contribution to ecological thought.

"The Moving Image" (the title poem of her first collection) states this reversal with characteristic economy. The speaker attempts to fix the landscape in the aesthetic permanence of art and finds that the landscape refuses fixity — it continues to move, change, exceed representation. The image cannot be made still because the country is not still, and to still it would be to kill it. This anticipates what Timothy Morton would later call "dark ecology" — the recognition that nature is not a stable, harmonious whole that humans have disrupted, but a dynamic, excessive, and ultimately ungraspable system that refuses to serve as backdrop for human stories.

6. THE LIMITS OF WITNESS: LATER POETRY

Wright's later poetry becomes increasingly frank about the limitations of aesthetic witness. In Fourth Quarter (1976) and Phantom Dwelling (1985), she writes with an explicitness about ecological crisis that the earlier poems had approached obliquely. In a famous late interview, she declared that she had "given up poetry for conservation" — not because she had lost faith in poetry's value but because the pace of destruction demanded a more immediately practical response.

That self-critique is itself poetically interesting. "Counting in Sevens" meditates on the failure of the lyric "I" to adequately witness ecological collapse, and on the disproportion between the scale of destruction and the scale of the individual lyric consciousness. What can a single voice do against the clearing of the Queensland rainforest, the silting of the Reef, the extinction of the thylacine? Wright's answer is not to abandon the lyric but to load it with an urgency that makes aesthetic pleasure guilty. Reading her late poems should be uncomfortable. It should make the reader feel the inadequacy of feeling, the insufficiency of witness without action.

This discomfort is, I would argue, the culmination of the ethical project that began in the earliest poems. Wright's landscape has always been a site of moral demand — a territory that asks human beings to answer for their conduct. In the late poetry, that demand becomes explicit, and the poem itself becomes the site not of resolution but of confrontation: with guilt, with loss, with the question of what it means to continue to live in and benefit from a landscape whose living systems you have watched being destroyed.

7. CONCLUSION

Judith Wright does not offer an environmental ethics of hope. She offers something more demanding and, I think, more honest: an ethics of accountability. The land in her poetry is not a

resource, a scene, a symbol, or a spiritual refuge. It is a territory in which every human action has consequences, in which those consequences are written and readable, and in which the poet's task is to read them accurately rather than consolingly.What Wright contributes to environmental literature is a poetics in which ecological concern is inseparable from political concern, and in which both are inseparable from the specific historical conditions of a settler-colonial society. You cannot write honestly about the Australian landscape without writing about what was done to its peoples. You cannot write honestly about what was done to its peoples without writing about what was done to the land.In an era of accelerating biodiversity loss and continuing Indigenous dispossession, Wright's poetry speaks with undiminished urgency. Her landscapes are still moral territories. They still demand an answer. Whether we are capable of giving one is the question her work has always been asking.

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