

Ancestral Echoes: Spectres of the Past in Judith Wright's Poetry

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In 1981 Judith Wright published *The Cry for the Dead*, which documented the history of colonial invasion and the attempted genocide of the Aboriginal people in the area of New England, New South Wales, in which Wright grew up. The volume was meant to parallel the family history *The Generations of Men* (1959) Wright had earlier written, outlining the pastoral history of her family (Brady 191). Wright says that the former book's title was derived from an Aboriginal practice of mourning, recorded by writers such as Gideon Lang, whom she quotes in the opening pages. In a pamphlet written in 1865, Lang wrote that "the natives"

have peculiar chaunts which they sing in honour of the recently dead, generally just before daybreak, and some of these are very touching. I was told an instance of this by a gentleman who formed one of a party who went in pursuit of a tribe among whom were the murderers of two shepherds. They reached the black camp before dawn, and while waiting for daybreak one of the natives rose, lit a fire, and commenced to sing one of these chaunts for the dead. Almost immediately afterwards, one fire was lit and one voice joined after another, until a line of fires gleamed down along the edge of the scrub, and the whole tribe joined in the melancholy dirge. (qtd. in *The Cry for the Dead* 9)

A number of Wright's poems including "Bora Ring", "Nigger's Leap, New England", "Half Caste Girl", "Eli, Eli", "The Ancestors", "At Cooloolah", "The Dark Ones", "River Bend" and "Two Dreamtimes" echo such mourning. All of these poems contain images of white atrocities and the resultant Indigenous spectral absences that haunt the Australian landscape.¹

There are three main spectres in Wright's poetry that this article addresses. The first relates to the loss and separation Wright experienced when she became aware of the history of the land she had felt a profound sense of identification with since early childhood (Huggins 36). Wright's exploration of her ancestral history and her familial complicity in the process of dispossession and environmental degradation acts as a ghostly thread

through her poetry. The second spectre relates to the traces of Aboriginal massacres and dispossessions. And the third is the spectre of the indigenous landscape that existed prior to British occupation, with a substantial number of indigenous species of flora and fauna now extinct.

This article will argue that these spectres are intimately linked in Wright's writing and that her poetic and private relationships with the Australian landscape are constantly mediated by the need to acknowledge these ghosts.² Gig Ryan comments in an essay on Wright that "Questions of ownership, the legality or otherwise of that ownership, the usage to which that land is put and the results of that usage must be of utmost importance to any landscape poet in Australia" (27). Yet, it is useful to begin by exploring Wright's personal spectres because it soon becomes apparent that they influence her later awareness of other spectral presences within the Australian landscape.

Born near Armadale, New South Wales, in 1915, Wright grew up on the family property, Wollomombi, and her deep connection to that country is apparent in much of her poetry. The tone of the poem, "To a Child" (1953), for example, intimates a distinctly animistic conception of childhood: "When I was a child I saw/a burning bird in a tree/I see became I am/I am became I see" (*Collected* 106). As Veronica Brady suggests, with a nod to the poet's indebtedness to a Romantic heritage: "[Wright] looked, as Blake would have said, not with her eyes, but through them", and this gave her "a profound sense of belonging" (29). Similarly, Shirley Walker describes the way in which Wright's poetry invokes the image of "a land . . . of paradisaic abundance" (*Vanishing* 25). Later, in the poem "Two Dreamtimes" (1973), Wright describes her relationship to her childhood in New England as an "easy Eden-dreamtime" (*Collected* 317).

This profound connection to the land of her childhood was complicated, however, as Wright became increasingly aware of the atrocities inflicted upon the local Indigenous inhabitants and the land itself by pastoralist families such as her own. Wright has written that she began to unearth evidence of white Australia's historical treatment of Aboriginal people while researching the pastoral history of her family for *The Generations of Men* (*Half* 249, 251, 255, Brady 191), and she continued to examine her family's complicity, and consequently her own participation, in the process of dispossession in both her poetry and non-fiction throughout her life. Lines from "Two Dreamtimes" such as "I am born of the conquerors" and "My righteous kin/still have cruel faces" (*Collected* 317), written fourteen years after *The Generations of Men*, demonstrate Wright's continued exploration of these

themes, and in *We Call For a Treaty* (1985), Wright states that her research into the history of Queensland

shocked me into a deeper realisation of the genocidal background of the pastoral invasion, in which my own forbearers had played a part; of the unpayable debt owed to the descendants of those who were dispossessed in that invasion; and in Queensland's intransigence in its treatment of those descendents. (qtd. in Huggins 104)

As her awareness of the brutal aspects of Australia's history increased, Wright began to feel alienated from the land of her childhood and the Australian landscape generally. As Ryan notes:

There is a fundamental conflict within Wright's work between the possessiveness of love and the recognition of prior claims. That is, if nature is the impetus for her work, and if language creates meaning and thus 'fusion', then the land she conceives in her poetry should by her effort be hers; yet she knows this is not historically the case, and that no amount of art or love can claim 'her' land for herself. (31)

This fundamental conflict is exemplified in "At Cooloolah". Wright's poem reads:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight
has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colours till he dies,

but I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake. (*Collected* 140)

The painful epiphany for Wright seems to be the realisation that the landscape to which she had felt so connected as a child was largely a manifestation of colonialist impositions on the land (Brady 94). The idyllic pastoral farm of childhood, replete with crops, English trees and animals, could only have existed as a result of the clearing of indigenous flora and fauna. Aboriginal conceptions of the land as sacred had been replaced with concepts of ownership, use-value and productivity. Indigenous peoples' knowledge had been discarded as "primitive". In this context, Wright's poetry is, in part, an attempt to foreground her personal spectres, which relate to the loss of the idealised country of her childhood. Yet, at the same time, it would seem that Wright is attempting to counteract the many exclusions and absences in Australia's official history by challenging the nation's cultural amnesia,³ and to confront readers with the various absences that haunt the Australian landscape and collective psyche.⁴ In terms of her poetry, these twinned

concerns manifest in the simultaneous “absence/presence” of lost intimacy, which is a constant spectral trace.⁵

Another turning point for Wright, in terms of understanding more intensely Aboriginal experiences of European occupation and continued exclusion, and her desire to participate actively in movements for change, was the deep friendship she developed with Oodgeroo Noonuccal during the 1960s (*Born xi*). As Ryan has commented:

If art is seen as consummation with nature, then stains on the landscape she [Wright] must enter are utterly her concern, and the stains on the Australian landscape are historical and legal (hence her fight for indigenous land rights and for a treaty), and environmental (hence her work for conservation). These causes for Wright are inseparable. (30)

The difficulties and ambivalences presented by this desire to challenge dominant and persistent colonialist hegemonies were often the subject of her work, both in her poetry and non-fiction.

Not all of Wright’s poems, however, dealt with the ghostly in reference to specific absences. Poems such as “Eli Eli” articulate a generalised, almost existential sense of the spectral. Written post-World War Two, during a period in which Wright was developing a growing awareness of Australia’s unacknowledged Aboriginal history, “Eli Eli” reads as a transhistorical lament for the consequences of human acts of violence. In the poem, a male figure, suggestive of both the Buddha and Jesus (Walker, *Flame* 61, Flood 16),⁶ tries to save people drowning in a river. The first and fourth stanzas read:

To see them go by drowning in the river—
soldiers and elders drowning in the river,
the pitiful women drowning in the river,
the children’s faces staring from the river—
that was his cross and not the cross they gave him . . .

He watched, and they were drowning in the river;
faces like sodden flowers in the river—
faces of children moving in the river;
and all the while, he knew there was no river. (*Collected* 44)

These stanzas invoke images of the many absences generated by social and political conflict, depicting these lost lives as being swept along a river Styx that endlessly flows across and through human history. The last line of the poem, which reads “and all the while, he knew there was no river”, also suggests that this is a spectral river existing beyond the physical realm,

either on a metaphysical level or as a psychological phenomenon that haunts our collective human unconscious.⁷ In this poem, Wright goes beyond the specific and regrets the elementary violence of human nature.

Out of Wright's confrontation with her personal and familial spectres grew the awareness that massacres and violence shadowed the Australian landscape. Official history in the mid-twentieth century largely excluded any mention of the brutality inflicted on Aboriginal people, although more progressive members of the non-indigenous community, such as the Jindyworobaks, were beginning to question such historical omissions. Wright's poem "Nigger's Leap, New England" published in 1946 in her first collection, *The Moving Image*, was written using material sourced from the "unofficial" versions of history she was beginning to unearth (Brady 93). Wright's father had told her about a massacre in which a number of Aboriginal men, women and children were driven off a cliff by white settlers for allegedly killing cattle (*Born xi*), and in this poem she asks:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.

Never from the 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
that has sunk many islands in its good time. (*Collected 15-16*)

Walker comments that while the poem is ostensibly about a particular event:

despite its obvious compassion for that event it goes far beyond it. The symbolism of the coming darkness and the rising of the tide, both rhythms of nature which suggest the relentlessness and inevitability of colonialist expansion. This symbolism suggests too the recurrence in history of such deeds of genocide, and the certain punishment of predatory races who, in the long view of history, will surely suffer the same fate. (*Flame 27*)

This conviction is alluded to in the poem when Wright writes: "We should have known / the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them / had the same question on its tongue for us", and it is reiterated again in the final lines of the poem. Jennifer Strauss also notes that the poem is a comment on the way

in which victim and aggressor are part of a shared humanity, and suggests that the last stanza “tends to obscure issues of responsibility and blur[s] the difference between aggressor and victim in its stress on this common fate of oblivion” (65).

This observation notwithstanding, Wright has commented that the story of Nigger’s Leap became deeply symbolic for her (*Born* xi, Brady 94). Brady proposes that although this story is one that most people would rather forget or “shuffle back into a violent and miserable past”, for Wright “that dark cliffhead, with the depth of shadows below it in the gulfs, is still a potent place” (Wright qtd. in Brady 94). Clearly, the resonance of those murders continues to reside in the land itself.

Wright also makes clear in this poem that Aboriginal people and the landscape are intimately connected, writing that “their blood channelled our rivers / and the black dust our crops ate was their dust”. The latter part of the poem, which reads “never from the earth again the coolamon / or thin black children dancing like the shadows / of saplings in the wind”, plainly articulates Wright’s belief that whatever was inflicted upon Aboriginal people was also simultaneously an act of violence against the land itself. The note at the beginning of *Born of the Conquerors*, confirms this assurance:

For Judith Wright, violence towards our fellow human beings is inextricably linked to violence towards the land, and much of the destruction caused over the two hundred years of European occupation of this continent has stemmed from ignorance—ignorance of the realities of Aboriginal life and ignorance of the land itself. (xv)

Martin Mulligan suggests that: “The problem Wright had in imagining her way to a reconciliation of past horrors was that she was trying to communicate with the disappeared; the ghosts of what had been” (26). This can certainly be seen in “Nigger’s Leap, New England”, and it could be said to be equally true of her poems “The Ancestors” and “Bora Ring”. These two poems take the idea of the spectral a step further by actually depicting the ghostly presence of banished indigenous spirits. In “The Ancestors” Wright describes an indigenous ancestor experiencing an enforced hibernation:

Their slow roots spread in mud and stone,
and in each notched trunk shaggy as an ape
crouched the ancestor, the dark bent foetus,
unopened eyes, face fixed in unexperienced sorrow,
and body contorted in the fern-tree’s shape. (*Collected* 111)

This passage simultaneously invokes the image of a foetus and an old man, an ancient presence waiting to be born and an entombed figure in

retreat from a sorrowful world. The poem also suggests a rupturing of an Aboriginal conception of time, an interruption to cyclic conceptions of birth, death and rebirth. The ancestor of the poem has, in a sense, been excluded from time, which has become linear and so-called progressive. It is certainly an image of exile, where the ancient and sacred spiritual systems of indigenous people are imagined by Wright to be trapped in a colonised landscape.

“The Ancestors” also reveals Wright’s growing awareness and acknowledgement of Aboriginal forms of sacredness, where spirit is immanent and animistic. She articulates this more fully in *Born of the Conquerors*:

The country that Aborigines see is very different. Insofar as we are beginning to understand a little of their way of seeing, the country is made up of songs and stories, linked across territories and tracks, and of the body of its makers—the ancestral creator animals and heroes, the spirits such as the Great Rainbow Snake, source and controller of its waters, clouds and rains, and the totality of being Aborigines living as dead, as descendants and upholders of ‘the country’s’ continuing existence through their creation of it by ritual and ceremony and song.
(138)

In European religious systems, which are predominantly monotheistic and transcendent, God is routinely imagined as separate from the material world. In this poem, Wright’s image is of an ancestral spirit who has been incapacitated—a trapped God—whose status as an immanent, animating spirit means that he is also susceptible to the violence inflicted upon the landscape.

“Bora Ring” similarly laments the loss of the sacred in the landscape. The bora ring of the poem refers to an ancient site of sacred Aboriginal rites on Wright’s childhood home in New England (*Flame* 29). The poem opens as follows:

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in alien tale.

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring: the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone: the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad’s feet are still.

Only the rider's heart
 halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
 that fastens in the blood the ancient curse,
 the fear as old as Cain. (*Collected* 8)

In order to describe what has been lost, namely the dancers at Corroboree, the hunters' nomadic life and sacred rituals, Wright invokes them, creating a sense of the spectral. The phenomena simultaneously exist and do not exist, are both present and absent, suggesting, as Walker explains, a "litany of absences that are somehow more potent than any presences could have been" (*Flame* 28). The apple grove, for example, invokes the spectre of a past corroboree, a ritual left behind as a ghostly trace on the landscape. Walker argues that this

identification between the Aborigine and his environment [is] so complete and powerful that nature itself has absorbed the lost Aboriginal culture and now, in its place, appropriates and performs the rituals of the tribe, for 'the apple gums/posture and mime a past corroboree/murmur a broken chant.' (*Flame* 28)

Furthermore, at the prompting of Walker's comments, it may be argued that the third spectral presence in Wright's work—the spectral indigenous landscape—is intimately connected with the second. In fact, the spectral landscape is present in all of the poems discussed so far. However, several of Wright's poems articulate a clear and separate sense of the spectral landscape. As Walker notes with respect to Wright's poem, "Two Dreamtimes:" "the loss of both white and Aboriginal childhoods—the two dreamtimes of the title—is associated with the destruction of the primal landscape" (*Vanishing* 26). In "Two Dreamtimes", Wright writes to Noonuccal (Jones 47):

If we are sisters, it's in this—
 our grief for a lost country
 the place we dreamed in long ago,
 poisoned now and crumbling.

Let us go back to that far time,
 I riding the cleared hills,
 plucking blue leaves for their eucalyptus scent,
 hearing the call of the plover,

in a land I thought was mine for life
 I mourn as you mourn
 the ripped length of the island beaches,
 the drained paperbark swamps . . .

. . . are you and I a once-loved land
 peopled by tribes and trees;
 doomed by traders and stock exchanges,
 bought by faceless strangers. (*Collected* 317)

Wright acknowledges the suffering endured by Aboriginal people at the destruction of this “primal” landscape. At the same time, she recognises that contemporary Australia is confronted everywhere with the spectres and consequences of mass extinctions and environmental degradation precipitated by pastoral practices, European farming methods and capitalism.

Importantly, though, in *Born of the Conquerors* Wright criticises some conservation movements for championing a concept of “the natural environment” or “the wilderness” that excludes the human.⁸ National parks are now routinely conceived as places of “pristine nature”. People may visit these places but are no longer permitted to live within their boundaries. Wright suggests that this definition of wilderness excludes Aboriginal conceptions of the environment and represents a continued imposition of secular, scientific and materialist paradigms onto the landscape.⁹ In her poem “Rainforest”, Wright grieves for the loss of an animistic, undifferentiated and non-anthropocentric relationship to the natural world, writing:

The forest drips and glows with green.
The tree-frog croaks his far-off song.
His voice is stillness, moss and rain
drunk from the forest ages long.

We cannot understand that call
unless we move into his dream,
where all is one and one is all
and frog and python are the same.

We with our quick dividing eyes
measure, distinguish and are gone.
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies,
yet one is all and all is one. (*Collected* 412)

Like the blue crane in “At Cooloolah”, the tree frog is depicted as an ancient totemic animal whose extinction, along with the burned forests and disappeared grasslands, leave the impression in Wright’s poetry of a haunted, desolate landscape, defined more by what has been lost than by what is left behind.

In this vein, many of the poems discussed here could also be read in light of Wright’s engagement with poetic Romanticism. Some critics, such as Andrew McCann, have suggested that even the more progressive Australian poets, including Wright, undermine their political stance when they adopt Romantic understandings of the land. He notes:

The bind here, in which the horror of colonialism ends up generating the melancholic pleasure of elegiac literature, stems partly from the

fact that colonial investments in place manage to survive a knowledge of colonial violence, that Anglo-Australian writers are continually trying to fashion meaningful allegorical landscapes out of battlefields and disaster zones—a melancholic self-fashioning of lyrical poetry out of genocide. So often the poet is the switching point in this series of transferences, mollifying as much as aggravating conscience, as progressive political identifications are undermined by residual if not regressive aesthetic forms. (52)

Certainly in some of Wright's earlier work including "Nigger's Leap, New England", "Bora Ring" and "At Cooloolah", a Romantic aesthetic is apparent and it has the potential to anaesthetise the reader to the violence of the colonisation process. McCann also states that by writing poetry that regrets the "doomed race" of Aborigines (a motif often found in the poetry of non-indigenous writers in the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century), the poet is effectively stating that she/he believes this process to be *fait accompli*. In poems such as "At Cooloolah", McCann suggests "there is a sense of colonial history's being subsumed into a much larger temporal dimension . . . [in a manner that] imagines a way of transcending racial enmity, and of reconciling the dead with the living" (51). A Romantic rendering of temporality, in effect, can make the present appear to be a mere moment against the vast backdrop of time, thus distancing the reader from the realities and depth of human suffering. I would add to McCann's argument to suggest that there are overtones of Rousseau's notion of the "noble savage" in some Australian landscape poetry (including, perhaps, some of Wright's early work), which could be interpreted as encoding Aboriginal people in the role of idealised other.

While Wright's early work can certainly be subjected to these critiques, historical contextualisation is important. In the mid-twentieth century, when many of Wright's well-known poems depicting Aboriginal people were published, she was one of the few writers acknowledging Aboriginal people's relationship with the land. McCann's criticisms, when applied in a contemporary context, are both insightful and valuable. When employing such evaluations in hindsight, however, there is a risk of ignoring the important role that poets such as Wright played in foregrounding issues such as native title, the historical treatment of Aborigines, the (il)legality of *terra nullius* and Aboriginal conceptions of the land.

Moreover, it is arguable that at other times Wright's activist voice is far more realist than romantic, predicting that unchecked environmental degradation will have serious ramifications for all Australians. In "Australia, 1970", Wright

celebrates the landscape's capacity to resist humanity's destructive impulses, but the poem concludes by implying that a lack of regard for environmental protection will ultimately be the undoing of humankind:

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
the drying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still;
that we are ruined by the thing we kill. (*Collected* 288)

The spectral force in Wright's poetry provokes non-indigenous readers to reconceptualise the landscape. This audience can no longer idealise the pastoral or the pioneering history of Australia without acknowledging its historically destructive side. Wright undoes various national myths and offers a new perspective of the Australian landscape. Her poetry makes the reader aware that the spectral always mediates, however unconsciously, relationships to the landscape and she forces the non-indigenous reader to recognise that even though they are on the land they are not easily of it. Wright's poetry suggests that until such readers are able to firstly, see, and secondly, integrate, the ghosts of the past, they will remain, as she says in "At Cooloolah", "unloved by all [our] eyes delight in" (*Collected* 140).

NOTES

- ¹ Although I acknowledge that the term "landscape" is a contested one, with some theorists suggesting it implies a colonialist or Romantic understanding of the land, I have chosen to use it as I have found no other appropriate term. As Martin Harrison outlines it, the term "country" is an alternative to "landscape". He notes that "[country] is a word, in short, which upsets the neat overlaps of meaning in terms like 'land,' 'property,' 'farm,' 'home,' 'district,' 'landscape,' separating these meanings out from each other and stressing how each brings with it its own non-Indigenous colonial history" (101). However, the term "country", as Harrison says, "is deeply inflected by Aboriginal ancestral senses of custodianship" (100) and as such, as a non-indigenous person using this term, I run the risk of appropriation. I would suggest that the term "land" is similar to "country" in this regard.
- ² Georgie Arnott suggests that writers had a choice regarding how they portrayed the Australian landscape, arguing "Those writers who (as Wright would say) were 'born of the conquerors' and dramatise their attachment to Australian landscapes have tended to legitimise colonial presence, and effect a trivialising of Indigenous connections to the land". These writers "inevitably forge links between the settler and the land. These links are the mainstay of nationalist mythology" (35). Wright chose to explore and foreground the fraught relationship between settlers, the land and the original inhabitants.
- ³ In *Born of the Conquerors*, Wright comments that while studying anthropology

at Sydney University from 1934 to 1936, she observed: “for anthropologists, it seemed to me, Aborigines seemed little more than objects of study. For many years, historians appeared to regard them as either invisible, or mere obstructions or occasional assistants in the exploration of the continent. Those attitudes have died hard” (xi).

- 4 Maureen Flood suggests that Wright’s own spirituality, a kind of immanent ethnopoetic version of the sacred, “is expressed in the poetry in an indirect way, often through absences, silences and spaces” (16).
- 5 See Jennifer Jones for further discussion on the issues of shared grief, the degradation of the land and Wright’s decision to face her pastoral inheritance.
- 6 Brady suggests that the poem, inspired by Arthur Boyd’s painting *The Mockers*, “seems to echo the Buddha’s sorrowful sense of living in a time of wars, with people killing and wounding one another, preyed on by wars” (135).
- 7 Walker suggests that the poem leads the reader to the conclusion that “love . . . alone can counter the fear and evil within, and achieve a Jungian integration of the dualities of the psyche: good and evil, the conscious and the unconscious” (*Flame* 61).
- 8 See Wright’s essay “Australian Wilderness and Wasteland” in *Born of the Conquerors* (143-50).
- 9 See also Penelope Layland (21).

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