

Property, Environment, and Identity in the Writing of William Kittredge, Simon J. Ortiz, Randolph Stow, and Charmaine Papertalk-Green

Kieran Dolin

University of Western Australia

IN 1965 THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MINISTER FOR LANDS told Parliament that “land development was the State’s ‘greatest adventure.’” Speaking of the expansion of the Wheatbelt, he declaimed that “in the great outdoors there is adventure and opportunity everywhere.”¹ Quentin Beresford, from whose research this quotation is taken, argues that “developmentalism” was the dominant Western Australian ideology and populist cause from 1900 to 1970. Predicated on government land release programs that offered farming blocks at favorable terms but required the clearing of native vegetation, the expansion of the Wheatbelt provides “one of the prime examples of the developmentalist ethos.”² It “invoked a vision of the State’s future with a romantic view of a pioneering society conquering nature.”³ Beresford, like other recent Australian historians of developmentalism, is principally interested in its effect on the natural environment.⁴ Yet this development was also inseparable from the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their traditional lands. Scholars of settler colonialism regard this dispossession as structurally central to understanding modern settler societies. Land is the key object of this colonial formation,

¹ Quoted in Quentin Beresford, “Developmentalism and Its Environmental Legacy: The Western Australian Wheatbelt, 1900–1990s,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 47, no. 3 (2001): 407.

² *Ibid.*, 403.

³ *Ibid.*, 408.

⁴ See Jillian Koshin, “Shifting Visions: Developmentalism and Environmentalism in Australian History,” *Australian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2011): 1–21.



as Patrick Wolfe has shown.⁵ Among the technologies that the settlers imported to satisfy their hunger for land was what John C. Weaver has called “the technology of land law,” which included concepts and mechanisms that erased native title.⁶ James Belich’s history of settler colonialism—*Replenishing the Earth*—includes a chapter entitled “Last Best Wests,” which focuses on Western Australia along with the plains of America’s Pacific Northwest.⁷

In this essay I examine works by writers in these two regions. I draw on two writers of settler heritage who critique developmentalism, William Kittredge and Randolph Stow, and two Indigenous writers who present alternative perspectives on land and community, Simon J. Ortiz and Charmaine Papertalk-Green. The essay pays particular attention to first-person genres, the memoir, lyric poetry, and the novel and to the representation of how subjects experience place and how that experience is mediated or limited by legal ideas of ownership and property. Carol Rose, a law professor at the University of Arizona, observed that “property is one of our most sociable of institutions,” dependent on a “social relationship of claim and recognition” that is communicated in story, symbol, and language.⁸ Literary texts, with their self-reflexive and innovative work on their culture’s myths, discourses, and genres, offer a productive lens through which to examine this process. Another law and humanities scholar, Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, shows in “The Culture of Property” that several effects on “communal life and cultural relations . . . flow from a system of private property.” In particular, she argues, “property law affects the ability of social groups to survive, and . . . the boundary lines drawn between and within groups.”⁹ The extent to which Indigenous populations in America and Australia have accessed such communitarian benefits in their encounters with property law is a question of great interest to post-colonial law and literature critics. Eric Cheyfitz is one who has critiqued the ways in which white law and stories have diminished Native American concepts of land and community identity.¹⁰

William Kittredge offers one of the most candid explorations of developmentalism and the “culture of property” in his memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992). According to the website of the Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, Kittredge “lived the classic western story.”¹¹ He grew up in the Warner Valley, in Oregon, on “a ranch the size of Delaware” that was formed out of the Klamath Marsh. This ranch was the fruit of his paternal grandfather’s obsession with acquiring land: after beginning life as the son of a failed prospector, he eventually owned or leased more than a million acres, putting all his earnings into the expansion and improvement of the land. His quest for property was matched by his son’s passion for scientific agriculture, which led him

⁵ Patrick Wolfe, “Nation and Miscegenation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era,” *Social Analysis* 36 (1994): 93–152.

⁶ John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush, and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1990* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), 140.

⁷ James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 393–432.

⁸ Carol M. Rose, “Introduction: Property and Language, or the Ghost of the Fifth Panel,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 18 (2006): 3.

⁹ Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, “The Culture of Property,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 4 (2000): 170.

¹⁰ Eric Cheyfitz, “The (Post) Colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Indian Literatures and Federal Indian Law,” in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1–124.

¹¹ Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, “Northwest Schools of Literature: Commentary; 1. William Kittredge, 1932–,” <http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Reading%20the%20Region/Northwest%20Schools%20of%20Literature/Commentary/1.html> (accessed July 22, 2014).

to literally remake the scablands and marshes into farmland through the use of mechanization, chemical pest control, and massive irrigation schemes. These techniques were initially so successful that when William Kittredge himself went to study agriculture at university, it was his father's methods that were taught. Ultimately, these manipulations in the service of industrial-scale farming put the natural cycles and balances out of alignment, exterminating birds and creating hordes of insects that had in turn to be poisoned, damaging the soil and destroying the traditional consolations that nature afforded the settlers. The narrative heart of the memoir, however, is the emotional estrangement within the family caused by the grandfather's total commitment to property.

Drawing on revisionist historiography and a deep knowledge of the literature of the west, Kittredge locates his grandfather's acquisitive ethos in the material conditions and the mythology of freedom of the American West: "Those old bastards congregated in backcountry like ours, cherishing their own power of will, and their heedlessness, and drawn to freedom they'd found by hiding out."¹² Kittredge memorializes this intensely masculinist frontier world, especially its comradeship and physicality, while recognizing that its utilitarian individualism created a diminished lifeworld in which their only sacred story was "the one about work and property and ownership" (27). The implicit promise of this story was that these values would provide happiness. The ranch was operated as a family company, with the grandfather as majority shareholder. He controlled other family members' lives, including that of his son, who was persuaded out of his own wish to study law and eventually sacked. Legal relations and business values came to predominate over affective ties. "What we owned was not land, but shares in the Warner Valley Livestock Company" (203). Profits were plowed back into the business and only some members were paid salaries. This structure led to a reification of people and place: it "distanced us from everything we might have loved, like each other and the place where we lived" (27). While working for his grandfather, William Kittredge pursued his love of philosophy and literature, nurturing an ambition to become a writer. In the 1960s, as the emotional and environmental costs of the desire to "own it all" became apparent and after a personal breakdown and the end of his marriage, he decided to leave.

Hole in the Sky is therefore the story of Kittredge's conversion from a mythology "of work and ownership" to an environmental awareness and of the difficult process of becoming a writer. Although the title may evoke ideas about the ozone layer, in fact it comes from a totem pole in a Native American village in British Columbia. A hole in one particular pole referred to a belief of the Tsimshian people that "stepping into your house was stepping into a place actually populated by all your people—alive or not" (10). Thus, this "hole in the sky" was a "doorway to heaven," and the house inside was connected "to the landscape of communal imagination" (10). Against this mythic image of integrated spiritual and physical worlds, Kittredge sets "another hole in the sky," the modernist sense of the death of God. Although this is perhaps a predictable move, the symbolism registers the sense of loss he feels about the desacralized landscape of the ranch: "The places around us were not alive with history, but they could be useful. It was another way for the world to be dead" (27). By the time of writing, he has an alternative: "We had lost track of stories like the one which tells us that the world is to be cherished as if it exists inside our own skin" (27).

¹² William Kittredge, *Hole in the Sky: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 27. Hereafter, page numbers to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

Just as *Hole in the Sky* appropriates Native American culture as a way of talking about alternative understandings of the physical world, so it reinstates the repressed history of violent dispossession into its account of the settlement of southeastern Oregon. “It was a Trail of Tears, yet I never heard it talked about. . . . It was not part of our common mythology. We knew a history filled with omissions, which can be thought of as lies” (23). In his years working on the ranch he meets occasional Indian men, but they are marginalized in his white narrative of *Bildung*; later, Native American writers such as James Welch help him to see how traditional stories provide keys to contemporary situations, but the narrative is reticent about Kittredge’s commitment to Native American rights campaigns.

In the final movement of the book, Kittredge revisits the lands of his childhood with his new partner, the writer Annick Smith. Gazing down from various mountaintops, he is awed by the beauty of his family’s former farmlands turned into nature reserves, but also by the silences, and he marvels at the impermanence of his family’s attempt at “inscribing their own names onto the land” through symbolic acts of ownership (232). Although this gaze is infused with an environmental ethic, these mountaintop scenes still involve what Stephen Muecke has called a “*specular* version of landscape,” a relationship to place founded on alienation.¹³ While Kittredge takes pains to point out in these concluding scenes that he recognizes the abstractness of his former understanding of the reality of this land, it may be that his inscription within modern western ways of speaking and viewing makes this distancing unavoidable.

We may contrast this specularity with the immanence of human life, prairie, and cosmos in the writing of Simon Ortiz. A writer from the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, Ortiz spent the winter of 1984–85 teaching in Okreek, on the Rosebud Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota. His 1994 book, *After and Before the Lightning*, is a poetic journal, a prose and verse record of everyday incidents and meditations on their significance throughout that season. In the preface to a later edition, Ortiz explained how the prairie winter was an omnipresent “reality . . . that could not be denied.”¹⁴

The far hills are no longer far hills. The horizon has merged into the galaxy. There is no end to things. It is all one, one distance, one dimension. Together in a fabric of winter, sky and land are sewn together, and the rivers and creeks of this prairie are arteries and veins of one body. And we, atoms and cells, move with the sinew of wind, frozen grass, ice-laden trees, the poor clothes we wear, and this weak car we drive. (5)

Ortiz presents a vision of the world in which people and place are fused into one being, a fabric in which the human element is a fragile and relatively powerless thread, in comparison to the snow and wind. According to Australian property theorist Nicole Graham, such “fused” people-place relations constitute the original meaning of the word “property”: “the intrinsic relationship between a particular place and the person or people living there, such that the two were mutually identified.”¹⁵ Ortiz articulates such a relationship in the introduction to his anthology, *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*: “The young are frequently reminded by their elders: these lands and waters and all parts of Creation are a part of you, and you are a part

¹³ Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 167 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴ Simon J. Ortiz, *After and Before the Lightning* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), xiii. Hereafter, page numbers to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

¹⁵ Nicole Graham, *Landscape: Property, Environment, Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 92.

of them; you have a reciprocal relationship with them.”¹⁶ Eric Cheyfitz describes this conception of land as “the inalienable ground of the communal” and posits a distinction between this model of “land as kinship” and Western society’s idea of “land as property.”¹⁷ Cheyfitz quotes from an Ortiz text to exemplify this Native American understanding.

Modern inventions such as the car are incorporated into this philosophy, as Ortiz shows powerfully in the poem “South and West” in *After and Before the Lightning*. In this poem, a diesel tanker overtakes the speaker’s car on a hill, then turns into an intersection as the driver “takes one look” and the “murderous wheels swing viciously” on the icy road (5). Bent on making a delivery deadline, the powerful truck and reckless driver may seem to dominate nature, but Ortiz ends the poem with the land’s perspective: “Forgiving, the prairie hills guide him / into the white, blue-ing distance” (6).

In this world, where *cosmos* and *nomos*, nature and law, are interfused, where property is a function of identity in place, modern Anglo-American concepts of private property are unsurprisingly questioned. In “Claiming Territory” the simplicity of the imperial action of annexing land by speech act is mocked:

It is a magnificent idea. Claiming territory.
Just climb the next hill, cross the river,
and say, “This is mine.” Nothing
scurries, nothing shifts, the Creator says
nothing. (26)

A shift in perspective from the stranger to the land opens up a representation of the natural world as “a beautiful heartland of continual motion” (26), which has been forming and changing for millions of years. In this light, the act of appropriation, “This is mine,” seems to arrest the process of creation while claiming it. In defamiliarizing private property by imagining it as viewed by sentient nature, however, Ortiz also registers the fear prompted by the innovation: “everything was awed, dismayed, dazed / by the incomprehensible idea” (27).

Among the local community whose lives are captured in *After and Before the Lightning* is a white rancher named Jim Bob. In a poem called “Salvation,” Ortiz records being up late writing and noticing the rancher also still at work on his vehicles, but outside “in the dark cold” (9). The poem turns the “fiercely turning” engines of truck and tractor into a metaphor of the harsh determination of the rancher and critically invokes the Protestant work ethic: “Brutally driven, I think, is not our salvation.” In a prose entry a couple of days later, Ortiz needs to get firewood for the house and knows there is some by the creek: “Jim Bob has told us the wood down by the creek is already spoken for. Friends of his. I decide we need wood. If his friends want it, they need to get it quick. Otherwise, I get it” (10). Although concerned about possible conflict, he realizes there is no alternative and determines he must act: “Our decisions are relatively simple once they become necessary” (10). It is not stated whether the wood, dead branches, is on private land, but this episode does seem to bring together two ideas of entitlement, one deriving from private ownership and ideas of exclusive use and one deriving from the “intrinsic relationship” between

¹⁶ Quoted in Patricia Clark Smith, “Simon Ortiz: Writing Home,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 222.

¹⁷ Cheyfitz, “(Post) Colonial Construction of Indian Country,” 10.

place and community,¹⁸ a principle whereby the products of nature are available to meet the life needs of community members: “The decision to do things requires no more than what is necessary. Food, shelter, clothes, heat, safety” (10). This reflection is cast, not in terms of general rule and particular circumstances, but in terms of a natural law of necessity.

I return now to the Australian West, and in particular to the northern Wheatbelt. Randolph Stow, who was descended from a family of lawyers on his father’s side and from station-owners who were early settlers in the hinterland of Geraldton on his mother’s side, grew up in this region and absorbed the culture of Australian pastoralism as a child. Unlike Kittredge, Stow became a published—indeed, an acclaimed—author while still an undergraduate, having transferred from studying law to an arts degree, majoring in English and French. In an extraordinarily prolific decade from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s he published five novels and a collection of poetry, in which he forged a modern sense of place out of the landscapes of his childhood, the stories his elders told, and his own ambivalent attachment to them. That process is dramatized in his semiautobiographical novel of childhood, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). Stow wrote this novel “in a snowed-up orchard in Aztec, New Mexico,” while traveling in America on a Harkness Fellowship, vividly recalling memories in another Western landscape “that appealed to” him.¹⁹

A key element in Stow’s complex response to settler history was his acute awareness from an early age of the dispossession of the original inhabitants of the land on which his extended family’s pastoral holdings stood. *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* includes a scene of discovery in which the young protagonist, Rob Coram, is shown a cave on his aunt’s property, which contains ancient Aboriginal rock art. Among the hands there painted is one that is the same size as his own hand:

He felt the cold rock under his hand, where a dead boy’s hand had once rested. Time and change had removed this child from his country, and his world was not one world, but had in it the camps of the dispossessed. Among the one monument of the dead black people, the sheoaks sounded cold, sounded colder than the rock.²⁰

This profound intimation of historical time, and of humanity lost, is embedded within a family conversation that is laced with the racial attitudes and expressions of the 1940s. As Rob grows up, he becomes fascinated by his white heritage, especially family history, the history of settlement, and Australian bush poetry. In exploring these forms of place-making through narrative, Rob discounts his father’s legal culture: “The late Mr. Justice Coram, bewigged and aquiline, stared down on him from the top of a bookcase packed solid with the late Dr. Coram’s law books. He supposed there was some history there, but it did not interest him. It was not like the land” (206). Yet law is the time-honored adjunct profession to farming, and much of Rob’s delight in the land is related to the sense of belonging derived from family ownership:

¹⁸ Graham, *Landscape*, 92.

¹⁹ See Bruce Bennett, “Randolph Stow, 1935–2010,” *Westerly* 55, no. 2 (2010): 150–54, for biographical details. For Stow’s own words, quoted here, see the interview by Xavier Pons and Neil Keeble, “A Colonist with Words,” reprinted in *Randolph Stow*, ed. Anthony J. Hassall (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), 356–68.

²⁰ Randolph Stow, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965; Ringwood: Penguin, 1989), 56. Hereafter, page numbers to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

the country seemed immense and wide-open and empty, their own property. So that it was a shock, like finding a hostile Man Friday, when they emerged from swimming . . . to find that some bastard kid from school had made off with their clothes. The indignity of having to chase after him, naked, worried them less than the impertinence of him being there at all. (231–32)

Stow registers how the culture of property, which parcels out differential roles and identities, is reproduced at the level of children's play, including an invocation of the settler-colonial trope of the "empty" land. The traditional Aboriginal owners of this region, the "Yamidgee [*sic*]," occupy a marginal place in the social world of the novel, subjects of overwhelmingly negative attitudes and degrading living conditions. The uncanny beauty and mythic significance of their sacred places, such as the cave, are recognized by Rob and his admired older cousin Rick, but in the past tense.

In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Aboriginal voices are silenced, their presence confined to spatial signs and their bodies to the fringes of social events. Yet the structure and lifeworld of the Australian pastoralist economy are dialogized by those traces and by two other influences: Rick's displacement and dissatisfaction after being released from Japanese prisoner-of-war camps and the authorial infusion of a Taoist discourse of "time and change" (56). As a result, Rob's dream of land as the ground of a permanent relation to place and to nature and his belief that "the blood of his country would go on and on, the blood of his country would never end, and there would be Maplesteads at Sandalwood forever, and the one apostate would be forgotten," (274) are juxtaposed against the realization that Rick's decision to leave represents the principle of endless change, undermining the myth of "the world and the clan and Australia" that Rob had constructed out of "his country" (275).

Popular literature has played a major part in the formation of that myth, especially the Australian bush ballads of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recited by family members. Among the poems Rob encounters is one that reflects a deep pessimism:

New Holland is a barren land,
In it there grows no grain,
Nor any habitation
Wherein for to remain. (222)

This verse is a pastiche ballad written by Stow, which is sung in full by a character in his 1963 novel, *Tourmaline*. While the landscapes of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* are frequently invested with a stark beauty, those of the earlier novel are oppressively hot and barren, dotted with the pits and mullock heaps of old mines. A town named after a mineral, *Tourmaline's* sparse physical environment is a once-prosperous goldfield that is now home to a dying community. The opening of *Tourmaline* embeds the discourse of property law within a representation of natural forces to suggest the fragility of white belonging in the land:

I say we have a bitter heritage but that is not to run it down. *Tourmaline* is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; tenants of shanties rented from the wind, tenants of the sunstruck miles. Nevertheless I do not scorn *Tourmaline*.²¹

²¹ Randolph Stow, *Tourmaline*, introduction by Anthony J. Hassall (1963; St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 1. Hereafter, page numbers to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

This orotund, paradoxical narration is the testament of a retired policeman, who is simply known as “the Law.” He is the town’s ineffectual remembrancer, the custodian of its history and self-styled interpreter of its present. His imagery, as distinct from his legalism, suggests a metaphysical world-picture, an image of difficult dwelling, and the overtones of Heideggerian “thrownness” are confirmed in a subsequent chapter by the unexplained arrival of a stranger, Michael Random, who was found dazed on the road leading into town.²² Yet this image is articulated through legal and anthropological concepts—“heritage,” “estate,” and “tenants”—in tension with powerful natural symbols of sun and wind. Through the Law’s ambivalent rhetoric, Stow appears to be questioning the interplay between the human and the natural environments and to be suggesting that in this world, white Australians with their imported law and economy struggle to hold their place against the encroaching desert sands and the heat.

The epigraph to the novel, a quotation from Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase*, “O gens de peu de poids / dans la mémoire de ces lieux” (iii), or, as translated by T. S. Eliot, “O people of little weight in the memory of these lands,” reinforces the impression of a failed integration between people and place.²³ To a modern reader, this displacement of white achievements in favor of an ecocentric consciousness, “the memory of these lands,” inevitably recalls the interanimation of land and humanity in Aboriginal culture. “Anabasis” in Latin meant a march across country, and Steven Matthews has shown how the Roman writer Xenophon’s work of that name was a “narrative of settlement, foundation and migration” that provided Perse and Eliot with an image of “modern diaspora.”²⁴ Stow’s citation of *Anabase* places the action of *Tourmaline* within the framework of a mythic analysis of modern history. As such, it can rightly be read as a “postcolonial allegory,” in which the small town is “opened up to a perspective that places it in an older landscape of the Dreaming traditions of Australian Aboriginal cultures.”²⁵ In particular, by drawing his image, “tenants of shanties rented from the wind,” from one of the most temporary and limited economic relations to land, that of the mining lease, Stow questions the quality of “habitation,” the depth of roots created in such a settlement, and, with it, the Lockean ideology of property as the fulfillment of both self and world.

The residents of Tourmaline project their needs on to the stranger, investing him with messianic powers: to divine a new source of water; to proclaim a new ethical path; to renew the fertility of the community; to give or receive love. It turns out that Michael Random’s chief ability is to find gold, though he also professes to be a searcher after spiritual truths. The mystery of his intentions and actions, and their effect on the townspeople, form the main plot of the novel. One of the local Aboriginal people, Charlie Yandana, thinks Random is “Mongga,” the creator spirit. In an irony that reflects on the primacy of material knowledge in Western Australian society, Random finds gold but no water, and, with that, his moral power is lost, the town settles back into its former attitudes, and the narrative ends as pessimistically as it began.

The testament penned by the Law includes not only the alternative Indigenous account of the universe explained by Charlie Yandana but also a character who espouses a Taoist preference

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), I. v.

²³ For Eliot’s translation, see “Anabase / Anabasis,” in Saint-John Perse, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1982), 31.

²⁴ Steven Matthews, “Provincialism and the Modern Diaspora: T. S. Eliot and David Jones,” *English* 58 (2009): 57–72.

²⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10.

for silence over words and for “the overwhelming power of inaction” (177). The latter’s sense of the limitations of language is a critique of the ornate rhetoric with which the Law has sought to dignify the history of Tourmaline.

Charmaine Papertalk-Green, who is descended from the Wajarri and Bardimia Yamaji Aboriginal peoples, traditional owners of the regions where Stow’s novels are set, began publishing poetry in the 1980s and published her first collection, called *Just Like That*, in 2007. Papertalk-Green writes in a direct voice, frequently reflecting on language used in black-white relations and on matters of concern to her people. In an interview with the poet John Kinsella, she describes her poetry as “just another way of ‘thinking out loud’ for me. The songs of my people—especially the sounds—have remained with me since childhood.”²⁶ The poem “Settlers” reconstructs the logic of Australian settler colonialism through a distillation of language and action: “Show me a water-hole / Then I’ll give you my bullet / Show me your bush tucker / Then I’ll get my sheep to destroy it / Show me how to survive / Then I’ll wipe out your tribe.”²⁷ Here what starts out as the language of exchange (“Show me . . . / Then I’ll give you . . .”) is revealed to be that of command and threat or, more precisely, a series of speech acts and their consequences, in which words are the vehicle of a project of domination and replacement.²⁸ As the poem unfolds, the ascending order of demands crystallizes this encounter as a drama in which Indigenous property rights are ignored, and Indigenous owners dispossessed: “Show me your country / Then I’ll take over it” (58). The starkness of speech in “Settlers” registers the brutality of the colonization of Yamaji lands.

The poems in *Just Like That* explore various consequences of that dispossession: the clash between “cultural values” and “modern values,” economic inequality, loss of language, social exclusion, and the prevalence of domestic violence and addiction. Aboriginal peoples’ political and legal campaigns for recognition of their rights with respect to land and cultural heritage over the last fifty years have produced clear gains, though always at the risk of lobbying by more powerful economic interests. In Western Australia, conflicts over Indigenous land and heritage have frequently been occasioned by mining ventures, a notable case in point being the mining of iron ore at Tallering Peak, a site sacred to the Yamaji. In “Mining Destroys” Papertalk-Green critiques the willingness of the people and their representatives to negotiate an agreement to mine, and hence the validity of the contract: “Why do Yamaji / Still trust mining companies? / They trick the Elders / With their fancy talk / They trick younger people / With flash of money” (48). This poem can be read in the context of native title claims and a series of disputes with mining companies and possibly reflects on an agreement concluded between the Yamaji native title representative body and the Mount Gibson Iron Ore Company in 2003, which the Yamaji lawyers regarded as a successful negotiation.²⁹ However, the poet laconically invokes an alternative discourse, that land is a living entity that “exists in *relationship* to everything else”³⁰ and the sense of personal attachment that arises: “My brother said, ‘Poor old Tallerang’” (48). This sympathy for the animate land is realized through a striking image of care for country:

²⁶ Quoted in John Kinsella, preface to Charmaine Papertalk-Green, *Just Like That and Other Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2007), 6.

²⁷ Papertalk-Green, *Just Like That*, 58. Hereafter, page numbers to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

²⁸ This reading is informed by Wolfe, “Nation and Miscegenation.”

²⁹ See David Ritter, *Contesting Native Title* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 57.

³⁰ The jurisprudential understanding is from Ambelin Kwaymullina and Blaze Kwaymullina, “Learning to Read the Signs: Law in an Indigenous Reality,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 196 (emphasis in original).

Scattered along railway tracks
 Between Mullewa and Geraldton
 I go to the railway lines near my house
 I can pick up a piece of iron ore
 From Tallerang—how sad is that. (48)

With its tone of resigned sadness at the disrespect shown to the sacred rock, this image illuminates the contrast between a holistic and an instrumentalist understanding of land and highlights the waste and destructiveness of the latter. It is fruitful to compare this response to mining with the hollow elegiacs adopted by “the Law” in Stow’s *Tourmaline* when he describes the landscape surrounding the town as “littered with the fragments of broken mountains” (1). This perverted lyricism of environmental ruin contrasts with Papertalk-Green’s plain speaking in response to personal loss: “Mining Destroys.”

The land is invested with another, noneconomic order of value in “Yamaji Rich.” This poem attempts to restate the wisdom of precontact Indigenous knowledge and to displace the exclusively monetary definitions of wealth in the dominant society: “Rich did not mean dollars or gold / Rich is spiritual. Rich is knowledge” (14). In asserting the truth of an uncle’s claim that “Yamaji’s are rich people” against the laughter it also generated, the poet realizes that the land is an intrinsically valuable heritage, an alternative form of capital:

The land has strong, rich stories
 Imprinted all over its face.
 Stories handed down for thousands of years
 (Sure is something to boast about). (14)

In turn, this understanding prompts an ethical adjustment, an attitude of receptivity, rather than an urge to impose projects upon the land: “Learning from the land / Listening to the land / Respecting the land” (14).

Despite their differences of age, gender, race, and location, the four writers examined here have used the cultural institution of literature to articulate testaments of place—that is, written statements of their beliefs about the proper relations between human groups and the lands in which they dwell. While the testament of *Tourmaline* is not to be taken at face value, its discernment of a “bitter heritage” seems equally applicable to William Kittredge’s autobiographical account of the American West. In summing up what he has learned, Kittredge recants his forebears’ faith in property: “My people drained the swamps and farmed them, and built roads and fences across the enormous sweep of that country, as if they were inscribing their names onto the land. This is ours, they said, we own it. But they didn’t, not in any significant way” (232). From his specular vantage point, the land now gives no sign of their presence. Instead, Kittredge professes an ontology that is close to the vision of reality apprehended by Simon Ortiz during his winter sojourn in South Dakota: “We are animals evolved to live in the interpenetrating energies of all the life there is, so far as we know” (234). All four writers acknowledge that this is a minority view in their societies, and their texts navigate between cosmological and political systems of reference. This dialectic is recognized as a conundrum by Ortiz in his poem “Hungry Questions”: “What does the cosmos / have to do with money?” (98). He pits this cosmic scheme

against “the urgent civilization / we are driven by,” with its commercial imperatives, imaged as a hunger for money.

And we answer the question
 With the question,
 “What does money
 have to do with the cosmos?”
 And arrive at no answer,
 still hungry. (98)

The sly polysemy of this final line, “still hungry,” which imports the expected sense of “still yearning for truth” but leaves the reader lingering over the physical fact of hunger due to poverty and dispossession, puts two value systems, two worldviews, into sharp relief. It distills the ongoing conflict between settler society and colonized peoples.

It is now fifty years since the minister for lands expressed his passion for development by appealing to a popular narrative genre. Since that time, new political movements have emerged to contest the ideology of adventure and to represent the interests of Indigenous peoples and the environment. A variety of legislative frameworks have been introduced to recognize the rights of traditional owners and the public interest in conserving the biosphere. The texts studied here span that period, and despite responding to the specific histories and traditions of their different countries, all give voice to an alternative vision of land and property. As yet, that alternative remains a minority position in both nations, and the very mechanisms that promise change occasion disappointment. In 2003 Simon Ortiz visited Australia in the weeks following the unsuccessful Yorta Yorta native title claim. On a panel with Ortiz, the Aboriginal writer and scholar Tony Birch expressed his frustration at the implications of the judgment, in which the judge

had more or less informed the elders that they did not exist, that both their rights to land and their identity had been “washed away by the tide of history.” . . . As I was talking Simon suddenly sat up . . . He touched me on the shoulder and waited for the room to quieten before asking me, “Tony, how does it make you feel when they say your people don’t exist?”³¹ A

³¹ Tony Birch, “Meetings with Simon,” *Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004): 141.