

**[Review] Charmaine Papertalk Green and John Kinsella,  
*False Claims of Colonial Thieves*, Magabala Books, 2018, 149pp.**

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*False Claims of Colonial Thieves* is the founding myth of colonial Australia. Yamaji poet Charmaine Papertalk Green and settler poet John Kinsella launch into the long overdue conversation Australia needs to have between the Country's First Peoples and the settler-invaders. Australia needs this radical intervention in publishing to move forward in dialogue with First Nations people.

On first glance this collection weaves together two unlikely, some may even think oppositional voices. First Nations poet Charmaine Papertalk Green is a member of the Yamaji Peoples of Western Australia; John Kinsella is descended from settler-invaders who made their wealth through farming and mining. Yet neither voice dominates this collection. Instead readers witness a yarn—as Papertalk Green describes it—where each poet challenges the current political discourse on Country and nation, and on extinction and climate change denial that Australia is spiralling towards.

I was fortunate enough to participate in an eco-poetics symposium recently where both poets spoke in dialogue about their collaboration. It was during this gathering that Papertalk Green described the exchange between herself and Kinsella as a yarn. The significance of this descriptor should not be underestimated as it indicates a return for First Nations Peoples to a culturally fitting model for future communication between Australia's First Peoples and settlers.

Yarning is about building respectful relationships. The yarning circle has been used by First Peoples of Australia for millennia to learn from a collective group; to build respectful relationships; and to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge. A yarning circle is a harmonious, creative and collaborative way of communicating; to encourage responsible, respectful and honest interactions between participants; to build trusting relationships; and to foster accountability and provide a safe place to be heard and to respond.

Papertalk Green and Kinsella begin this yarn. The circle is small at the moment—just two voices. But their words are a call for others to join in this circle respectfully and with reciprocity. What becomes apparent as the book unfolds is *the most* important conversation of our time—how do First Nations Peoples and settler-invaders move forward in a shared conversation that acknowledges the past, *and* looks to the future of our Countries, the nation, and our planet?

In 'Prologue', Kinsella writes:

And so the mining companies reach into our schools,  
funding programs that make students in their own image,  
filling the holes they make with propaganda  
sold as learning, gatekeeping into the church of university. (xi)

As Kinsella isolates a colonial narrative that perpetuates a false claim, Papertalk Green writes back in 'Prologue Response':

Privilege blindness  
if environmental scientists say so  
water comes from a plastic bottle  
what lies on or within country  
cannot be seen for the  
privileged are privilege blind. (xi)

Each poet writes *to* Country. Papertalk Green writes *from* and *into* Country, writing her story and the stories of her people *back* into Country that was written over by the false claims of settler history. Kinsella, who identifies himself as part of the false claims and a descendent of colonial thieves, writes himself *out* of Country through writing back *over* the false claims of place in an act of unwriting the colonial mythscape.

Kinsella writes: 'Any rights I have over words I cede to you' (90). Through this ceding of literary sovereignty, Kinsella exposes and abdicates his position of privilege that Papertalk Green so poignantly critiques as blind; and in doing so, disrupts and unsettles settler mythscapes of time and place that Papertalk Green writes back into. Papertalk Green's voice channelled through words on the page reclaim stolen Country and story held hostage to colonial thieves. Her words cut to the core of settler mythscapes in poems like 'Always Thieves':

Thieves arrived in all disguises  
Colonial officers, convicts, settlers, free men  
No treaties and trinkets here  
Guns and guns were their dirty talk  
Thieves wrapped warmly in the  
Blankets of terra nullius

Arrived as colonial thieves  
Remain as colonial thieves. (128)

Country and land are separated by a schism of cultural practice and accumulated history. They are the antagonists in this narrative and organise the stories into separate frames. This work moves through layers of pain, grief and revenge, towards a shared history through a dialogue, led by First Nations people. The conflict of the metanarrative is that Kinsella's land and bush can never be Papertalk Green's Country. But the yarn about what is different, what is shared, and what can never be understood, is timely.

As Kinsella writes in 'The Wild Colonial Boy':

The wild colonial boy can't call Australia home, though he has never  
really left its shores; but he has travelled outside its jurisdictions,  
and he has travelled far beyond its metaphors. (137)

In acknowledging that settler-invaders can never know our Countries as First Nations Peoples do, these words mount a powerful challenge for others to question the platitudes of nation; the hollow words of settler history; and the current political discourse around First Nations Peoples that still contain us.

Both poets regularly address one another directly, and in 'Respect'. As an Aboriginal writer, I wish more Australian poets would demonstrate similar measures of respectfulness, reciprocity and willingness to make a space. Such collaborations can only be born of deep mutual respect, a shared sense of place, and a desire to heal Countries that the nation sits shallowly above. Both poets shun the kind of tokenistic gestures of unity that so often coop any movement towards reconciliation through truth-telling—quick-fix gestures and policies that seek to turn what is and always will be an ongoing process into a product; a box to be ticked. As Papertalk Green says:

I won't pretend it's easy  
Living in an intercultural space  
Cultural clashes and tensions  
Bounce and collide  
And sometimes explode. (62)

Kinsella's response to tokenism and containment is sensitised to how hegemonies wield power to enforce acquiescence and complicity. He challenges settler-invader writers to transgress:

The state deployed its shock troops who watched on as poems were  
yelled  
at them, their commander marshalling attitude, saying: how  
can we

shut this one up? Poets of the world, take notice. They will  
 close  
 you down the moment you break free of your anthologies,  
 your safety in pages of literary journals, the comforts  
 of award nights. (125)

*False Claims of Colonial Thieves* is a book that fearlessly pushes back against colonial discourses of Australia. These poems read through the ‘country of milk and money’ (9) to the theatre of long-standing epistemic violence. Papertalk Green asks: ‘who are the real rulers?’ (9). These poems actively interrogate space—mostly around Mullewa (population 425), a mining and farming town with a somewhat (in)famous church—and cast critical light across that town’s history of injustices, cultural cruelty, cultural genocide and the cultural pain that is left behind.

The Epilogue authored by both Papertalk Green and Kinsella reminds us of the long road still ahead:

In a way colonisers can’t understand  
 So shall I hum a lullaby and share a story  
 To soothe the hurt down generations  
 A gentle whisper from the past  
 Visits me in my dreams  
 Or is it the future I see  
 Why are we still invisible? (145)

Poetry can do things that history cannot. This book begins the difficult, long overdue yet essential-for-the-future-of-race-relations—and healing—that Australia needs to have about place, belonging, her/histories and truth-telling. It is not a conversation that will ever be finished—it is the beginning of the timely circular yarn that needs to be had with and led by First Nations Peoples.

#### WORKS CITED

- Papertalk Green, Charmaine, and John Kinsella. *False Claims of Colonial Thieves*, Magabala Books, 2018.
- Papertalk Green, Charmaine and John Kinsella. ‘Dialogues of Time and Places.’ Keynote, Unsettling Ecological Poetics Symposium, Oct. 2019, University of Sydney.