



GENRE, STRUCTURE & LANGUAGE

Genre

False Claims of Colonial Thieves is a collection of poems concerned with identity and specific locations. The technical term for this is topographical poetry, meaning poetry of place. As the earliest theorists of this genre realised, topographical poetry never simply documents a region: it always probes a little deeper to consider the meaning of the town, building, church, land, park or river concerned; the values it represents; and the kind of society it supports. Often, topographical poetry documents reality in order to guide readers to see that better alternatives are possible. As Wiradjuri poet Jeanine Leane (2020) wrote in her review of *False Claims of Colonial Thieves*: 'Poetry can do what 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'.

In *False Claims of Colonial Thieves* Green and Kinsella probe how places and their histories reflect Australian social values. They trace an ongoing conflict over those values, asking readers to examine underlying attitudes. Their poetry participates in the topographical poetic tradition of imagining ideal worlds and teaching readers to believe in them. In this volume Green and Kinsella focus particularly on the small town of Mullewa and the surrounding region of Geraldton in Western Australia. This involves telling stories about the history of particular places: for example, the arrival of settler-colonials in Australia; the appropriation of First Nations land; the establishment of farms and a pastoral economy; and the building of mines; but also the histories of First Nations peoples. Green and Kinsella tell this story together, from two sides of the fence, so to speak: one the descendent of the First Nations peoples displaced by European settlement, the other the descendant of white people who farmed and managed mines in the district. Kinsella never speaks for



Green, nor does Green speak for Kinsella. Green describes First Nations peoples' relation to certain places and her own familial connection and experience, and Kinsella recounts the white settler perspective and his own history as a descendant of farmers, mining engineers and managers. By braiding their voices together, the poets demonstrate that the way forward is respectful dialogue. The poets speak their individual truths, describe their origins and map their future; nobody is silenced or dominant. The ideal they imagine is embodied in their dialogue: together the poets experiment in a new multi-voiced way of accounting for the past and developing ideals for the future.

Structure

Within the collection the poetry takes a number of different forms: some poems are arranged in verse, some in numbered sections, some in dialogue. The poems vary in length. None follows a strict rhyme scheme. In most, the poets address the reader, a third party or each other directly, as though speaking from their own experience.

The structure of the volume as a whole is dialogical (involving a conversation) and multi-voiced (containing multiple voices). It is unusual for contemporary poets to compose and publish together. Clearly the volume was born of collaboration, but Kinsella and Green's individual authorship remains clear. Most of the poems in the collection are single-authored, and the final line of each of these is followed by 'JK' or 'CPC' to designate authorship. Several poems are co-written; in these (apart from 'Epilogue'), alternating segments are attributed to each poet, giving the impression that the poems document a conversation. This effect of a dialogue between the poets is maintained throughout the collection; many of the single-authored poems are in pairs or groups of poems on a similar theme. For example, the co-written poem 'Hawes – God's Intruder', about the Roman Catholic priest Monsignor John Hawes and the church he designed and built in Mullewa, is followed by Kinsella's 'Bottlebrush Behind Our Lady of Fatima Church, Nanson, Chapman



Valley', Green's 'Honey to Lips Bottlebrush', then Kinsella's 'Our Lady of Mt Carmel, Mullewa'. These poems work together as a group; it is as though the dialogue established in 'Hawes – God's Intruder' is continued in the three single-authored poems that follow. Each poem is distinct, as is each poet's voice, and yet they demand to be read together as ruminations on a common theme from a range of perspectives.

Language

Traditionally poetic language differs from spoken language, dramatic language and the language of prose. Poetic language is more likely to employ rhetorical devices such as alliteration, metaphor, hyperbole, repetition and simile. For example, '*Dig it up / Blow it up / Crush it up / Poison it up / Ship it out*' (Green, 'Selfish warriors', p.10, ll.12–16) uses rhythmic repetition with minor variations to emphasise the relentlessly exploitative logic of mining, while the couplet '*Hills broken into millions of pieces / Deep cuts into the flesh of earth*' (Green, 'Dream mine time animals', p.8, ll.11–12) uses a simile likening the land to a living human or animal body.

Visual distortion is another poetic technique employed; for example, consider the following lines from Green's poem 'Don't mine me' (p.14):

King

Queen

Government

Economy

Asia

PROFIT (ll.9–14).

The visual presentation of these lines on the page makes them stand out from the rest of the poem. First, they are in italics, whereas the rest of the poem is not. Second, they are arranged in a sequence of increasing indents to give the impression of a staircase of words; by contrast, the



rest of the poem is aligned to the left margin. Such visual elements guide the reader to pay particular attention to certain words and lines.

Intertextual references (allusions to other literary or non-literary texts) are also used; for example, Green's line '*Gimme money money money*' quotes the ABBA song '*Money, Money, Money*' (1976), to emphasise the greed of Traditional Owners who sell out their own culture ('*Selfish warriors*', p.10, l.18).

Ekphrasis (description of a visual art work within literature) provides an opportunity to reflect upon the nature and function of art, as in Kinsella's '*On Julie Dowling's My White Friend, Geraldton Regional Gallery, 2017*' (p.105) and Green's '*Old Girl*' (p.94).

Green and Kinsella write in **the vernacular** (everyday local language). Green captures the turn of phrase and words of First Nations speakers, and Kinsella replicates the language of his contemporaries and family. This language is idiomatic (natural to the speakers). Making poetry from Australian spoken language has a political point. It is a way of insisting that Australian culture is not defined by 'proper' English, the language of the colonisers. Both Green and Kinsella have reason to distance themselves from Englishness. As Kinsella says, the English language represents 'the chains and slavery of the languages / of occupation' ('*The Wild Colonial Boy*', p.135, ll.14–15). By writing poetry in the Australian vernacular, Kinsella and Green express what the Australian poet Les Murray called 'the vernacular republic' (1982), that is, a strong vision of Australia as culturally and politically independent of Great Britain.

One quality that makes Green and Kinsella's vernacular language poetic is their use of code switching and juxtaposition (contrast) to jump from one kind of language, tone or allusion to another. This is achieved through:

- linguistic shifts: for example, Green splices Wajarri words and phrases into her poems, as in the line '*Finding time to walk over / Each other's barna*' ('*I won't pretend*', p.62, ll.16–17)



- blends of discourses: for example, Kinsella draws scientific terms and concepts into his poems about mining, as in 'mobs / of sheep don't "split like mercury"' ('Red Lead, Almost Dead', p.25, ll.9-10), where a scientific concept provides a simile
- homonyms (words with multiple meanings): for example, the title of the first poem in the volume, Kinsella's 'Undermining' (p.1) refers to both a tendency to belittle others, and to excavation for mining. The word suggests a connection between the two activities. 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 in country with propaganda' ('Prologue', p.xi, ll.4-6). Kinsella shifts from the idea of holes dug into the earth by mining companies to the idea of holes as conceptual gaps in values and ideas.

The words of songs are called 'lyrics' because they exhibit the personal heart-to-heart quality of lyrical poetry. Green and Kinsella's poems are frequently **lyrical** (written in a personal voice). This creates the impression that the speaker/voice (personal in the poem) has an intimate rapport with the reader.

At times *False Claims of Colonial Thieves* is **didactic**; that is, it tells readers directly what to believe. It insists that readers should distrust the lies that serve beneficiaries of the colonial system that continues to dominate the government and economy of Australia. Didacticism is reinforced through imperatives (authoritative commands) such as, 'Don't crawl into a / Dark corner of cultural nothingness' (Green, 'Yamaji Culture', p.66, ll.16-17).