ENTRANCING OBJECTS:
HISTORY, PLACE AND COLLECTING

in
Brian Castro’s The Garden Book, Jillian Watkinson’s The Hanging Tree, Andrew McGahan’s The White Earth, Delia Falconer’s The Service of Clouds and Steven Carroll’s The Time We Have Taken

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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis, subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I discuss the entrancing potentialities of the motif of collecting and examine its relationship with themes and motifs of hauntedness and enchantment in five recent Australian novels (Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book* (2005), Jillian Watkinson’s *The Hanging Tree* (2004), Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2004), Delia Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds* (1997), and Stephen Carroll’s *The Time We Have Taken* (2007)). My discussion of these novels focuses on the way that themes of historical representation and post-colonial dispossession, identity and belonging emerge through their depiction of a heritage of stories and material relics; and I identify the collecting motif in these texts as a site where the textual and the material intersect, revealing a haunting and sometimes enchanting past.

I have chosen Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels because they are stylistically diverse, yet, when considered together, they trace a cross-section through Australia’s contested geography and troubled past; and provide a small but significant sample of some Australian literary preoccupations during the last two decades. They offer opportunities to test the versatility of a collecting-based reading and explore its relevance to their shared themes and motifs, which indicate the importance of the uncanny as a trope of post-colonial destabilization and resistance, and also emphasize the potential value of tropes of materiality, proximity and presence in post-colonial historical writing. My thesis makes an original contribution to Australian literary studies by utilizing insights from European collecting theory, in conjunction with some aspects of material culture studies and Australian post-colonial criticism, to develop the notion of the entrancing or “entrancing” potentialities of collecting as a critical perspective and literary motif and to consider its possible contribution (as a trope of material presence) to post-
In Part I, “Ghosts and Gardens”, I discuss collecting’s relationship with tropes of hauntedness in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, and McGahan’s novels, in which the effects of colonial and post-colonial dispossession and trauma haunt the novels’ protagonists, and the past is portrayed as uncomfortably close. I refer to Walter Benjamin’s seminal work on history, collecting and narrative; as well as aspects of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and ecocritical theory, to explore collecting’s relationship with ghosts and hauntedness and argue that, in these novels, collecting offers alternatives as well as supplements to historical narratives which fail to take account of the ghosts (metaphorical or otherwise) of the past. I show how the collecting motif’s uncanny qualities emerge both literally and metaphorically, through allusions to ghosts, gardens, wilderness and certain forms or modes of materiality (fragmentation, detritus, contamination), creating a sense of temporal and spatial ambiguity which is analogous to hauntedness, and through which accepted concepts and perceptions of history and place are successfully destabilized. I argue that the collecting motif in these texts is used in ways that form an effective and entrance-ing strategy for unravelling the rhetoric that connects land, heritage and identity in post-colonial society.

In Part II, “A Distant Country”, I focus on the sense of enchantment that permeates Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, and consider its association with collecting and its role in their representations of a seemingly-distant past, recalled in terms of nostalgia, intimacy and desire. Referring to Jane Bennett’s concept of enchanted materialism and Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden’s analysis of the Australian sublime, I argue that these novels convey a different mode of uncanny experience. In these novels, collecting’s enchanting and entrance-ing effects arise from experiences of presence, proximity, and attachment, which uncannily elicit a sense of transformation and perceptual and epistemological instability. In these novels, this is
expressed through a complex interplay (or “shimmering”) of collecting-related metaphors, images and experiences of distance and proximity (physical, emotional, and temporal), which draws attention to the role of certain visual and spatial concepts and metaphors in establishing control of territory and shaping subjectivity.

In conclusion, I contend that in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, the collecting motif, in association with the tropes of hauntedness and enchantment, contributes significantly to these texts’ problematization of specific representations of Australian history and place, and provides “entrance” to the space in which new hi/stories may emerge. My analysis of these novels also suggests that a collecting-based reading, focused on tropes of material presence, may usefully augment current debates about Australian post-colonial writing and its approach to the risks and responsibilities of representing the past.
INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I seek to demonstrate the potential of collecting as a literary motif and critical perspective on Australian post-colonial fiction. I reveal this hitherto overlooked potential by applying elements of European collecting theory, material culture studies and post-colonial criticism to my analysis of tropes of hauntedness and enchantment in five recent Australian novels (Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book* (2005), Jillian Watkinson’s *The Hanging Tree* (2004), Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2004), Delia Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds* (1997), and Stephen Carroll’s *The Time We Have Taken* (2007)).

Considered together, these novels trace a cross-section through Australia’s archetypal landscapes, and the contested geography of a post-colonial society. Collecting motifs feature strongly in all five texts, as their protagonists explore a heritage of stories and material relics, and discover a troubled, haunting and sometimes enchanting past.

Through their shared themes and motifs, and their stylistic diversity, the texts I discuss in this thesis offer useful opportunities to explore the versatility and value of a collecting-based reading. The novels or their authors have all been awarded or shortlisted for major Australian literary prizes; from the Miles Franklin Literary Award to the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, and Premier’s Literary Awards in various states; so these texts provide a small but significant sample of some Australian literary preoccupations and priorities during the last two decades. They investigate the risks and responsibilities of representing the past; and reflect and reinterpret some of Australian settler colony literature’s dominant themes, including questions of dispossession, identity and belonging.
Australian fiction (including these novels) often articulates these themes through the trope of the uncanny, and collecting theory is well suited to exploring this aspect of Australian literature. In my thesis, I argue that as a literary motif and critical perspective, collecting’s value for Australian post-colonial literature emerges through its ability to provide encounters with the uncanny, which problematize the boundary between language and the material world, and provide “entrance” to the spaces in which meaning emerges and representations of history can be both produced and challenged.

Collecting has multifarious implications in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. Themes and motifs of collecting often emerge as their protagonists research or recall their own or their family’s pasts, encountering collections or engaging in collecting-related activities such as the gathering and reassembling of artefacts in albums, libraries, exhibitions, manuscripts, negotiations and conversations. In some of the texts, particularly Castro’s and Falconer’s, collecting has a strong structural as well as thematic significance, and aspects of collecting (and its accompanying effects of hauntedness and enchantment) may be identified in the imagery, syntax and narrative structure.

Some collecting theorists attempt to establish a coherent framework for their analysis by distinguishing between true or pure “collecting” (usually involving the serial acquisition of objects), and other forms of accumulation, such as gathering artefacts for historical research; hoarding; or acquiring souvenirs (Baudrillard 10; Stewart xii). Others, though, maintain that defining an essence of collecting is problematic for many reasons. The narratologist Mieke Bal, for instance, argues that collecting may ultimately be “virtually impossible to define” because any attempt to develop an “a priori definition of collecting” depends itself on “a view of knowledge that is ultimately at stake in the problem of collecting” (Bal 99). Moreover, any automatic privileging of a culturally specific interpretation or formulation of “collecting” is questionable.
In my thesis, rather than attempt to define an essence of collecting, or select one specific theoretical structure or system for discussing collecting, I have chosen to use a fairly inclusive and contingent interpretation of “collecting” as a concept, practice, and textual motif that is structured and informed by the themes and concerns of the individual novels and, more generally, by various social practices and discourses. This allows me to consider the many ways that, collecting functions, in these texts, as an adjunct, supplement or even alternative to conventional modes of historical understanding and representation.

Although much collecting-related theory is Eurocentric and often strongly linked to Western urban cultures, collecting (as Tom Griffiths notes in his history of Australian collecting traditions, was intimately related to colonial discourse (Griffiths 25-26); and moreover aspects of collecting theory (such as its preoccupations with topics such as possession, subjectivity, historiography, and narrative) are especially applicable to the issues of historical representation in post-colonial society. In particular, the work of the early twentieth century German literary critic, philosopher of history and book collector, Walter Benjamin, can illuminate collecting’s relationship with the uncanny, and its potential to provide alternative understandings of historical time and loosen the grip of dominant or oppressive versions of history. Metaphorically, Benjaminian collecting is an encounter with ghosts. Benjamin uses collecting to reveal the way that the past and present haunt each other; and to counteract and discredit linear, narrative constructs of history (Benjamin, “Theses” 253-254).

Benjaminian collecting is particularly helpful as an approach to reading Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, which use images and metaphors of ghosts and hauntedness to uncover repressed versions of history, and allude to the return of past traumas and injustices. Often, collecting is the catalyst for these apparitions. In Falconer’s and Carroll’s
novels, the uncanny emerges more obliquely through tropes of enchantment. My interpretation of the collecting motif’s function in all five novels is strongly informed by the Benjaminian notion that collecting offers opportunities to engage with the uncanny, in the form of moments of elusive, ephemeral perceptual realignment, triggered by the salvage of cultural detritus. In these ways, collecting can, albeit indirectly, open up or provide entrance to an awareness of social and intersubjective obligation and transformative possibilities.

However, Benjaminian theory and practice forms an important reference point, rather than an underlying framework, for my analysis of Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. My thesis also draws on a range of other theoretical perspectives, especially the work of Jane Bennett, Lyn McCredden, Bill Ashcroft and Frances Devlin-Glass, to expand and develop the potential of a collecting-based reading of Australian fiction and respond to specific characteristics of these texts. The work of these critics is particularly helpful for exploring the relationship between the motifs of collecting and tropes of material presence and enchantment in these novels; and for considering the relevance of this relationship to certain issues and problems in post-colonial literary discourse.

Post-colonial writing uses both textually and materially-oriented strategies to expose, explore and, often, to destabilize the ideological and discursive mechanisms through which power is exerted, places and peoples are defined, histories are authorized, and, sometimes, dissenting voices are silenced. However, the influences of post-structuralist theory, as well as the political agendas of post-colonial writing, mean that many writers emphasize the textual and linguistic basis of subjectivity, and affirm values such as hybridity, ambiguity and instability, as a way of unravelling connections between discourse, power and identity, and challenging essentialist or universalizing representations of culture or history. On the other hand, theorists of material
culture from Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin to Michel de Certeau, as well as more contemporary scholars and critics including Jane Bennett, Bill Brown, Katharina Boehm, Susan Stewart; and, in Australia, Bill Ashcroft, Lyn McCredden, and Ken Gelder, have often argued (albeit from a wide range of philosophical and theoretical positions) that attention to the material dimensions of life — including collecting — may also offer valuable alternative or complementary ways to uncover repressed histories and silenced voices, particularly in post-colonial contexts.

These strategies may overlap with textually based approaches in their theoretical underpinnings, applications, and implications. However, incorporating materially-oriented perspectives in post-colonial and contemporary historical discourse remains challenging: because of its apparent stability and specificity, the material world is often associated with an objective “grounding” of signifiers or systems of meaning (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 17) or as the critic Sigrun Meinig suggests, in her study of Australian historical novels, a “hidden attachment to ahistoricity” (Meinig 351). These concepts are generally antithetical to post-colonial critiques of privileged representations of place and history. The recent acrimonious academic and political disputes about colonial atrocities and “settler” society’s responsibility for the past (famously dubbed the “history wars” by historians Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark (8)) provide a compelling example of the polemical effects of such notions of authenticity and essence and their role in national history.

In this context, I suggest that collecting theory can provide another fruitful approach to the problem of how tropes of material presence and proximity can contribute to post-colonial critiques and discourses that traditionally esteem ambiguity, hybridity and instability. More controversially, perhaps, it can also provide one response to the question of whether tropes of attachment such as “home, or belonging or identity” (which are associated
with the concrete specificity and presence of the material world, in the form of
the regional or local and individual) have any valid role in this discourse
(McCredden 15-16).

My thesis examines these issues in the context of two further problems raised
by some prominent Australian literary critics and post-colonial scholars. In
colonial writing, especially exploration literature and the colonial Gothic genre,
the trope of the uncanny was sometimes used in an attempt to assimilate and
contain the unfamiliar environment and meet the practical and discursive
challenges of appropriating others’ places and histories. In post-colonial
writing, though, the trope is often used to unravel dominant versions of
history and emphasize the past’s haunting and uncontainable aspects. As
academics and critics Ken Gelder, Rachael Weaver and Jane Jacob observe
that, in this context, it may create a “productively unstable dynamic”
conducive to reinterpreting received notions of place and identity (Uncanny
Australia 24).

However, Gelder, Jacobs and Weaver have also expressed concern that
ostensibly post-colonial uses of tropes such as ghosts and hauntedness may
sometimes be an example of a reiteration of “older colonial logics” (Gelder,
“Imaginary Australian” 163); an observation echoed by the critic David Crouch
(96). Crouch, though, observes that the options for avoiding such reactionary
discourse are not yet well resolved: “Gelder and Jacobs offer little in the way
of real contexts in which a more productive exchange can be imagined”, other
than the “maintenance of the haunted anxieties” (Crouch 102). In my thesis, I
acknowledge this situation as an important context for my analysis of tropes of
collecting and the uncanny, but I also take account of the claim, by Lyn
McCredden, Bill Ashcroft and their colleague Frances Devlin-Glass, that recent
Australian literature shows evidence of a “presence culture” (25), which seems
to offer potential contexts for a “productive” broadening of discourse. In the
chapters that follow, I endeavour to show that a collecting–related reading of
the tropes of hauntedness and enchantment in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels can contribute usefully to this process.

The first part of my thesis focuses on the relationship between collecting and the trope of hauntedness in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, while the second part uses a slightly different theoretical perspective to examine the connections between collecting and tropes of enchantment in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. Overall, the arguments in both parts are linked by the notion of the uncanny.

In Part One of my thesis, “Collecting and Hauntedness”, the first chapter, “Ghosts and Gardens: Collecting and the Unsettling Effects of the Uncanny”, provides some definitions and historical and theoretical contexts for my discussion of Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, and their use of collecting’s ghostly connotations to expose the complex and sometimes internally conflicted rhetoric of possession, dispossession, and heritage through which place and history are represented, and power and identity are negotiated, in post-colonial Australia. In this chapter, I outline some connections between notions of heritage, collecting and historical representation; and introduce and discuss some of the cultural traditions, generic conventions and metaphorical associations through which the collecting motif is linked to ghosts and hauntedness.

In the following three chapters in this section of the thesis, I consider each of the novels individually, exploring connections between the collecting motif and the trope of the uncanny which extend beyond the demands or conventions of particular plots or genres. In Castro’s, Watkinson’s, and McGahan’s novels, stories and memories of racial and social marginalization, war, and colonial atrocities haunt the novels’ protagonists, and the past is portrayed as uncomfortably close. The collecting motif’s uncanny qualities
emerge both literally, through allusions to ghosts and apparitions, and metaphorically, through its association with these texts’ imagery of garden and wilderness and certain forms of materiality (fragmentation, detritus, contamination), creating a sense of temporal and spatial ambiguity which is analogous to hauntedness.

My discussion of these novels begins with *The Garden Book* because it is a complex and theoretically rich text, which not only examines the collecting of heritage material but also engages directly with its own heritage of collecting (and other) theory, especially the work of Walter Benjamin. The ethical and political value of collecting is, in Castro’s terms, closely connected with a particular literary aesthetic. However, many of the motifs and concepts in *The Garden Book* also have relevance to the other novels considered in this thesis, which range from highly theoretically self-aware prose which engages adventurously and extensively with the epistemological and historiographical implications of collecting and story-telling, to texts in which the collecting is less prominent or more conventional narrative strategies are used.

In Chapter 2 of my thesis, “The Wildness Beyond: Insiders, Outsiders and Collectors in Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book*”, I discuss how, in *The Garden Book*, Castro uses collecting motifs and strategies to investigate the experience of the migrant, the foreigner and the “outsider” in Australia; a “nation...shrinking through simplification” (Castro 155). I contend that Castro both echoes and problematizes Walter Benjamin’s work, drawing on both narrative and collecting in ways that offer detours through the subtle yet pervasive heritage of “foreignness” that emerges in language, while also exploring the potential of collecting’s concrete and material qualities. In Castro’s text, I argue, collecting functions as a provisional strategy rather than a stable concept, but, as such, also provides an effective (and entrancing) way of opening up or unsettling the concepts of both geographical and textual
place, and of drawing attention to the plight — and also the potential — of the “outsider”.

In the next two chapters, I consider, respectively, Jillian Watkinson’s novel *The Hanging Tree* and Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*. These texts provide opportunities to examine the role of collecting in less theoretically adventurous narratives, and in the context of the issues of indigenous dispossession and epistemology which form the haunting and ghostly background for the historical exploration and collecting in both novels. Although broadly similar to *The Garden Book* in many of their themes (dispossession and discrimination; re-possession of family heritage; environmental degradation, conservation, and husbandry) and motifs (collecting, storytelling, ghosts, and wilderness and “garden” or, in these novels, farms), these texts focus more extensively on how conflicts over claiming land and identity, both between and within settler and indigenous communities, in Australia are underpinned by this complex interplay of rhetorical and practical strategies. I suggest that, in these novels, the collecting motif’s uncanny potentialities tend to productively undercut the redemptive implications for settler society, which potentially accompany these texts’ portrayal of an otherwise “unsettling” situation.

In Chapter 3, “Lines, Trees and Circles: Heritage, Collecting, Stories and Silences in Jillian Watkinson’s *The Hanging Tree*”, I discuss Jillian Watkinson’s novel *The Hanging Tree* as an example of a text which responds to Australia’s history of indigenous dispossession and racial discrimination by utilizing the tropes of ghosts and hauntedness as a sign of belonging as well as a symptom of alienation. In this chapter, I argue that Watkinson’s use of the collecting motif invokes the uncanny in ways that highlight the shortcomings of the linear and binary spatial, temporal and social metaphors and models through which “settler” society and culture has been structured.
Watkinson’s strategy of celebrating diversity and reversing hierarchies carries some risk of diminishing the impact of her critique of the colonial legacy. However, I argue that this is, to some extent, countered by her emphasis on the importance of materiality (encountered through collecting) and experience (through both collecting and storytelling) as an entrancing catalyst for moments of silence and openness, in which ghosts can be noticed and repressed hi/stories can emerge. I refer to aspects of Walter Benjamin’s earlier work on storytelling to illuminate the implications of the notion of “experience”, and the significance of the different forms of historical representation referred to in this novel — history-keeping, storytelling, and collecting. I also note that Watkinson’s novel presents an unresolved tension between these modes of historical knowledge, which reflects the complex imbrication of language, silence, and power which characterizes the relationship between indigenous and “settler” cultures. I suggest that, from a critical perspective, it also usefully underscores some of the complications of translating Benjamin’s model for application in a very different cultural context.

In Chapter 4, “Wild Things: Collecting and Exploring in Andrew McGahan’s The White Earth”, I explore the ways that collecting’s connections with the uncanny, and its entrance-ing potentialities, are realized in a text that revives generic conventions from the colonial era. In this chapter, I maintain that although collecting is not utilized as a structural element of McGahan’s narrative, some of its entrance-ing potentialities are still realized through his re-staging of the colonial Gothic genre and his imagery of decay and conservation and haunted and haunting relics. Expanding on the critic Emily Potter’s argument that The White Earth (through the trope of “contaminated materiality”) exemplifies a developing Australian “ecological poetics”; I argue that the collecting motif, especially through its association with the uncanny,
makes an important and distinctive contribution to this trope of materiality and its role in McGahan’s text.

I extend Potter’s materially based reading by referring to Jennifer Rutherford’s Lacanian analysis of nationalism and the rhetoric of the “good”, and Walter Benjamin’s collecting-based dialectical conception of history and nature. I contend that, in *The White Earth*, the collecting theme and motif helps to articulate some of the nuances and inconsistencies of the discourses of identity and nation within Australia’s “settler” community, adds a temporal dimension to the conventional Australian literary trope of spatial exploration, and also exposes how concepts of nature and culture may be used by a range of communities within Australia in attempts to “naturalize” their respective claims to identity and ownership.

In Part II of the thesis, “Collecting and Enchantment”, I discuss Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, which present a more meditative and ambivalent portrayal of place and history, and investigate how the uncanny dimension of collecting also emerges in texts which explore the roles of nostalgia, enchantment and the sublime in Australian historical and spatial representation. I explain that enchantment also has an important, although equivocal, role in Australian literature, where it may be associated with nostalgia and the re-instatement of notions of authenticity and origins as central to formulations of identity, place and history. Modernist and post-modernist allusions to disenchantment and re-enchantment, which respond to the perceived loss of meaning, spirituality, or transcendent signifiers in the [post] modernized world, have significant implications for post-colonial issues, especially debates about the merits of proximity, presence and attachment as elements of post-colonial discourse.

In the first chapter of Part II, “A Distant Country: Collecting, Enchantment, and the Shimmering of Time and Place”, I consider the relationship between collecting and enchantment. I introduce the concept of enchanting materiality,
and explain how the collecting motif, in Falconer’s and Carroll’s texts, can convey an enchantment with the material world which, through its association with notions of proximity and presence, has various, and potentially entrance- ing, implications for these novels’ representations of history.

In Chapter 6, “Liquid Possibility: The Entrance-ing Transformations of Collecting in Delia Falconer’s The Service of Clouds”, I examine how Falconer’s depiction of the enchanted world of a Blue Mountains tourist destination — and the various forms of collecting associated with it — provides opportunities to engage critically with the discourses of Romanticism, science, nation and empire, which have traditionally informed, or framed, certain representations of Australian history and place. This chapter is divided into two main parts, in which I focus on different aspects of the collecting motif and its complex implications in The Service of Clouds.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the thematization of photographic and souvenir collecting in this text, and show how these collecting activities are connected to metaphors of distance and proximity derived from the discourses of Romanticism, science, nation and empire which inform representations of the Blue Mountains. In the second part of the chapter, I note that the rich texture and imagery of Falconer’s writing itself evokes some of these forms of collecting, but contend that overall, the collecting motif in this text offers an “entrance-ing” approach to making sense of history and recuperating the historically overlooked. Falconer’s use of the collecting motif reveals collecting’s epistemological ambiguity and complexity. She exploits this trait to both reflect and problematize representations of history and place. In her text, collecting motifs invoke the uncanny in the form of images of materiality, which elicit enchantment while also evoking mobility, metamorphosis and transformation, and produce an enchanting and entrancing “shimmering” of the metaphors of spatial and historical distance and proximity. I argue that the effect of this is to destabilize relationships
between frame and framed, centre and margin, and past and present, while also inviting engagement, commitment, and further interaction.

My thesis concludes with a discussion of Steven Carroll’s *The Time We Have Taken* (2007), which shares, with Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds*, an emphasis on nostalgia, melancholy, and a quiet sense of delight in the enchanting possibilities of the material world. Unlike the other novels discussed in this thesis, *The Time We Have Taken* has an urban setting, an unnamed outer suburb of Melbourne. *The Time* is one of the “Glenroy” series of novels by Melbourne writer Steven Carroll. The series (including *The Art of the Engine Driver*, *The Gift of Speed*, and *Spirit of Progress*), which traces the evolution of a suburb over the span of two generations, overlaps in theme, plot and characters. The material world of the suburb, and its significance for memory, identity and historical representation, is evoked in nuanced detail in each of the *Glenroy* novels, but I have chosen to focus only on *The Time*, both because it effectively presents a representative “snapshot” of the series as a whole, and because collecting has particular significance in this text.

In this chapter, “The Days and the Distance: Collecting, Speed, Stillness, and History’s Visibility in Steven Carroll’s *The Time We Have Taken*”, I suggest that the enchanting effects of collecting in *The Time* also entail an entrance-ling potential. This emerges most clearly through Carroll’s emphasis on the collection’s qualities of stillness and interiority, in which an object’s material presence may be suddenly foregrounded and recontextualized. This produces a sense of uncanny displacement, and access to otherness, where History becomes visible in unexpected ways. I argue that Carroll’s references to collecting, although less prominent than in the other novels discussed in this thesis, form part of a strategy of “entrance-ment” that reappropriates the rhetoric of Romanticism to reclaim the historically marginalized space of suburbia, and unsettle traditional historical narratives of national development.
Entrancement is a near-synonym of enchantment, and similarly, means to be in a trance, to be hypnotically absorbed. It implies internalization; indifference to surroundings; suspension of critical faculties; and in this sense, a state of enchantment or entrancement seems an unpromising context for a critical approach to history. However, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “trance” is also an old word for a passageway, and, with a slight shift of emphasis, the word “entrance” enables one to “make an entrance” as an actor setting foot on stage, or to step through an entrance: a “door” or “passage” into some place (“trance” Def. 2 Oxford English Dictionary). In the following chapters, the double-edged quality of “entrance-ment” is a central motif in my discussion of the relationship between collecting and the tropes of hauntedness and enchantment in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels.
PART I: Collecting and Hauntedness

“Inside the fence, it is the wildness beyond that becomes the place of writing, the site of reverie” (Paul Carter 155).
1. GHOSTS AND GARDENS: Collecting and the Unsettling Effects of the Uncanny

Gardens, trees, and earth: the imagery in the titles of *The Garden Book*, *The Hanging Tree*, and *The White Earth* foreshadows a theme that preoccupies many Australian writers and is central to all five novels discussed in this thesis: relationships between land, identity and power in post-colonial society. In Castro’s, Watkinson’s, and McGahan’s novels, the collecting motif, through its role as a conduit or catalyst for hauntings of all sorts, supernatural and otherwise, plays an important role in problematizing the rhetoric of possession, dispossession, and heritage through which these relationships may be sustained, or challenged. The collectors in these novels, whether close to home, exploring the garden or in the wilder country beyond, find that possession (of place, history, identity) suggests not only ownership, but also being possessed — in ghostly manner, both in place and “out of place”. In this chapter, I outline some of the connections between these themes and motifs, and explain why a collecting-based reading may be useful as an approach to considering the representation of history in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, and Australian post-colonial literature more generally.

1.1 Collecting, Heritage, and Post-Colonial Representation

In *The Garden Book*, *The Hanging Tree*, and *The White Earth*, collecting motifs emerge as the novels’ protagonists investigate their respective family histories and discover and recount various experiences of dispossession and displacement. In the course of their searching and researching, the characters in these novels gather resources drawn not only from “official records” (Watkinson 319) but also from family homes and albums, shoeboxes of heirlooms, gossip and family tradition: sources marked by the unpredictable vicissitudes of family life and the emotional intensity of family relationships.
Collecting in these novels is also a process where family and national heritage both converge and diverge, exposing some of the effects and mechanisms of historical and social dispossession in colonial and post-colonial Australia.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines heritage as “that which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth...the culture, traditions and national assets preserved from one generation to another”. Inheritance is not in itself a form of collecting, but heritage comprises the notion of a collection, the selection and maintenance of a canon; and although the term “heritage” is often used interchangeably with “history”, it is not synonymous with it. Historian David Lowenthal asserts that heritage “diverges from history not in being biased but in its attitude towards bias. Neither enterprise is value-free. But while historians aim to reduce bias, heritage sanctions and strengthens it” (Lowenthal, The Heritage Crusade 122). Lowenthal notes that “[t]he most crucial distinction is that truth in heritage commits us to some present creed; truth in history is a flawed effort to understand the past on its own terms” (Lowenthal, The Heritage Crusade 119).

However, heritage practices may be used against the prevailing bias. For instance, as the critic Joy Damousi has noted, the collecting and maintenance of family heritage is not necessarily just a consoling or reassuring activity, but also has a political dimension: "[t]he articulation of loss and trauma in the public sphere by a diverse range of marginalized groups in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, signifies an important shift in our understanding of 'the political'. This has become inextricably tied to the 'personal', connected to the domestic, the familial and/or the sexual" (Damousi 112). Historian Kate Darian-Smith observes that histories of “…Indigenous Australians challenge our national myths. So too do the stories of non-belonging and disinheritance that lurk behind the popularly constituted affirming histories of our migrant nation" (Darian-Smith 3).
Insofar as it is acknowledged that a dominant historical discourse or representation of heritage suppresses or overlooks counternarratives, one solution may be to challenge “national myths” and other dominant historical narratives by increasing the scope of collecting. The novelist Marion Halligan, for instance, advocates more comprehensive collecting (or “storykeeping”), both of stories (“things that exist, that must be found...preserved and guarded...they are fragile, and may sift away...or fragment into...shards” 8 ), and through story — she warns that “…to turn experience into story is to control it, to own it...to forget or remain ignorant of our stories is to be doomed, possibly to repeat them, but perhaps worse, to lose them altogether” (7).

I suggest, however, that in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, the collecting motif has important consequences for their problematization of particular representations of history and place, which extend beyond simply uncovering alternative narratives. This potential is not, however, immediately obvious in the context of many customary interpretations of collecting. For instance, collecting might initially seem to have a limited application for a critical approach to reading or writing hi/stories in a post-colonial context, because, in practice and in theory, it has often been associated with acts of possession, enclosure, containment and control. As critics and scholars including Tom Griffiths, James Clifford, Felix Driver and Susan Stewart have noted, some Western collecting traditions have a close connection with the economic, scientific and philosophical developments and rhetorical strategies that supported colonial exploration and expansion, and, later, the often-discriminatory discourses of national identity (Griffiths 9-27; Clifford 215; Stewart 147; Driver 82). Such “applied” collecting is usually regarded as subordinate or supplementary to an authoritative explanatory narrative, and also is usually distinguished from pure or recreational collecting, although the
two forms of collecting often share some ontological and epistemological assumptions relating to “temporality, wholeness and continuity” (Clifford 215).

Similarly, critics from Jean Baudrillard to Susan Stewart have used psychoanalytic theory to draw attention to the structural conservatism of souvenir collecting and self-affirming insularity of “pure” or serial collecting (Stewart xii). Baudrillard condemns the collector more emphatically for having “an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity”. Baudrillard, in his more recent essay “The System of Collecting” (24), criticises the possessive act of the serial collector as a futile “enterprise of abstract mastery where the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world” (8); an attempt to achieve the “reciprocal integration of object with person” (12), and questions whether the collection “can ever be fashioned into a discourse oriented otherwise than toward oneself?” (24).

Baudrillard and Stewart offer valuable analyses of how collecting is conceptualized and deployed in certain cultural and political contexts, and their work helps illuminate some of the allusions to collecting in the novels I discuss. In this context, though, the collecting motif’s role in post-colonial literature may seem restricted to that of an example or metaphor of a more fundamental epistemological closure, represented by the physical enclosure of the collection (a closure which may nevertheless be illusory if the notion of narrative is extended to include collecting (Bal 100), thereby situating collecting within the signifying chain and opening it to the same instability as other texts). However, these notions of collecting do not fully account for what I refer to as the entrancing and “entrance-ing” role of the collecting motifs in the texts I discuss. There are some other less reductive ways of theorizing collecting, which also suggest various ways that it may function as a subversive element in its own right. In the novels I discuss, “collecting” as a concept, motif and practice is “brush[ed] against the grain” (Benjamin, “Theses” 257) in
various ways, and, in turn, it emerges as an element with the power to disrupt stories and histories.

1.2 A Ghost Story: Collecting and an Uncanny Heritage

In this thesis, I argue that in the five novels discussed, the “entrance-ing” potentialities of collecting arise primarily from its connections with the uncanny. The term “uncanny” (particularly when used in the context of psychoanalytic theory) refers to an experience described by Sigmund Freud as “unheimlich” or unhomely; a sense of disturbing and often frightening strangeness, which arises within the context of an otherwise familiar (albeit repressed) experience (Wolfreys 239-240). In literary criticism, the term is often used to describe the uneasiness caused by recognition of the ceaseless interplay (or “différance”) of signifiers which, according to post-structuralist theory, characterizes language and subjectivity, and may be thought in terms of a ghostly “trace” (Derrida, “Différance at the Origin” 65-66). Allusions to ghosts and hauntedness often serve as a metaphor for the indeterminacy of boundaries and presence evoked by the uncanny. The critic Derek Attridge, for instance, uses an image of the uncanny, the ghost (a “borderline creature, an insider as well as an outsider” whose “otherness...is not opposed to its familiarity”), to describe the conditions under which meaning emerges in language (Attridge 175-176).

In the novels I discuss, collecting’s links to the uncanny have a range of implications, and take a number of forms. In Castro’s The Garden Book, for instance, the narrator describes collecting as a process of “hunting phantoms”, which “releases ghosts” (albeit metaphorical); while in Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, the collecting of relics elicits ghostly visions and spiritual experiences. In Australian (and other post-colonial) literature, references to the uncanny often function as a challenge to, or disruption of, certain representations of belonging and identity in colonial or post-colonial society.
Sometimes this disruption takes the conventional form of a ghostly apparition which acts as a reminder of past injustices, although ghost stories are a relatively minor genre in Australian literature (Gelder and Jacobs, *The Postcolonial Ghost Story* 116); and the uncanny is perhaps more commonly found in the context of landscape imagery, where (particularly in the work of writers with a “settler” or colonist background) it reflects a more generalized unease about the legitimacy of settler society, and often also alludes to the instability of signification which jeopardizes national myths and historical narratives on a structural as well as factual level.

For example, Australian Studies researcher Sara Wills notes that “Australian space is ‘haunted’ by its colonial ‘trauma-scapes or badlands’” (Wills np), but in some of the earliest Australian writing, it was an apparent lack of history, and the analogous desert spaces of central Australia, which contributed to the writers' emphasis on a sense of strangeness, alienation, and the uncanny. These tropes continued in later Australian writing, and the post-colonial and cultural studies scholar Paul Genoni, in his analysis of Australian exploration literature, suggests that ultimately, “[t]he void the explorers encountered at the centre of the continent...has come to symbolise the failure of non-Aboriginal Australians to properly settle in their new homeland” (Genoni 15).

The literary critic and sociologist Jennifer Rutherford suggests that “the foundation of a new Australian poetics” emerged in the early nineteenth century in Marcus Clarke’s writing, where the Romantic trope of the “haunted house [becomes] the land itself”, and that the landscape “becomes the mirror of an unhoused, unbound and sick psyche” (Rutherford, “Undwelling” 121).

David Crouch notes that in Gothic literature, “...ghosts return, and their spectral presence has often been read in terms of a "return of the repressed" (Crouch 95), and the images of an uncanny landscape in much Australian writing may have similar connotations: Rutherford, referring to psychoanalytic criticism, suggests that the myth of Australia’s haunting emptiness has “less to
do with an original strangeness — the myth of vast tracts of uninhabited space — and much to do with the unnamed residue of entrenched and crudely articulated fantasies of nation and subjectivity” (Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder* 151). In Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, family, national and natural heritage converge or collide in these texts as both these Australian traditions of literal and metaphorical ghostliness or hauntedness are evoked, in the context of the collecting motif.

1.3 The Ghost in the Garden: Hauntedness, Collecting and the Unsettling of Place

As critics like Rutherford and Crouch have noted, rather than haunted houses, Australian writing often features landscapes permeated by ghostliness, where the binary oppositions through which the Australian landscape has been constructed in colonist and “settler” discourse (centre and margin; outside/outback and inside/interior; civilisation (house or garden) and wilderness) begin to fail. Similarly, whereas collecting is traditionally associated with interiority and enclosure, in Australian writing it often elicits a sense of “unhousedness”. This is reflected in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, where many of the sites of collecting are haunted and haunting landscape and liminal zones. They include the decaying ruins and eerie bushland in *The White Earth*, the elusive and metaphorical garden, remnant forest and semi-urban hinterland in *The Garden Book*, and the disturbing intersection of rose garden and outback rangeland in *The Hanging Tree*. McGahan’s text, with its imagery of ghostly apparitions emanating from an eerie landscape, ruined buildings and a sinister collection of relics, echoes the conventions of the colonial Gothic and also alludes to the uncanny landscapes of exploration literature.

For the purposes of strategically re-reading colonial literature, and in post-colonial writing, allusions to ghostliness and hauntedness may seem to provide
“...a range of vivid, unsettling counter-narratives to the more familiar tales of colonial promise and optimism” (Gelder and Weaver 9). It can be argued, though, that in some instances, tropes of post-colonial discourse such as hauntedness are sometimes be re-appropriated as camouflage for a more conservative and reductive affirmation of containment and stability (Gelder, “Imaginary Australian” 163; Hutcheon “Afterthoughts” 6; Liu 78). For instance, they may be used as a starting point for imagining a state of reconciliation and redemption (Gelder 164), attained at the risk of understating difference or erasing the past.

Ken Gelder, for example, cautions that the “unsettling conditions of post-colonialism” may actually enable a “settler Australian relation to country to become, paradoxically perhaps, more secure than ever before” (Gelder, “Imaginary Australian” 163). Gelder and Weaver note that the Colonial Gothic genre is “intimately tied to the violence of settler life in Australia” (Gelder and Weaver 9), but is also “in a kind of dialogue with features or tropes of the genre already popularised elsewhere” (Gelder and Weaver 2), such as the use of “picturesque” imagery of castles and ruins. While this dialogue might alter the colonial relationship of centre and margin, it is also likely that such imagery may, as the critic Simon Ryan has suggested, simply be “another way in which the land is accorded significance only in relation to a European history” (Ryan, Cartographic Eye 77).

David Crouch also suggests that in Australian fiction, the ghost story may sometimes be a way of “silencing an indigenous presence within a discursive structure that asserts the legitimacy of non-indigenous occupation” (Crouch 102), and he cites, as a typical example from the Gothic genre, the cathartic destruction of the haunted house. In this context, the materiality of the relic is identified as an origin of these ghostly encounters, rather than a medium, and thus the relic’s destruction conclusively and safely sequesters the past. The novels I discuss in this thesis, although addressing many issues of concern in
post-colonial Australia, and inclusive of indigenous and non-Anglo migrant perspectives, tend to focus on settler colony concerns about legitimacy and belonging. Given this, it is worth considering whether, in these novels, collecting’s ability to reveals the “ghosts” in the garden is a source of entrance-ment, rendering Australian history productively strange and unsettling; or whether it functions as just another strategy for containing and controlling this past; making it familiar, bringing it into the family (and whose family?).

Some of these strategies for containment and control may be apparent in at least two of the texts discussed in my thesis. *The White Earth*, for instance, contains an example of an apparent erasure of the past’s ghostly presence, when, near the novel’s conclusion, the protagonists’ collection of haunted and haunting relics is destroyed by fire, along with the derelict mansion that contained them (McGahan 365-369).

In *The Hanging Tree*, this effect is even more evident. In this text, contact with artefacts and relics often induces the emergence of Aboriginal spirit beings, which are portrayed as existing in harmonious parallel with ghostly visions in the European tradition. Moreover, the novel’s final image is also of fire, which (in an act apparently approved or motivated by the indigenous spiritual being, the Rainbow Serpent) finally erases the notorious Hanging Tree, a relic of colonial atrocities (Watkinson 316). The image has connotations of cathartic renewal and reconciliation. Although not without merit, this does seem to entail a final denial of difference, which also opens the way for a denial of responsibility: “...we’re all the same...Something else is making the big decisions” (Watkinson 316)). While this closing image is not directly linked to collecting, it extends and consolidates the tendency of collecting-related images, in Watkinson’s text, to redirect or deflect the unsettling implications of the uncanny.
On the other hand, the allusions to fire in Castro’s *The Garden Book* emphasize collecting’s materiality in ways that reveal, rather than resolve, the haunting power of the past; and overall, I will argue that in both *The Hanging Tree* and *The White Earth*, collecting motifs are employed in ways that tend to successfully uphold rather than deflect the power of the uncanny, and evoke, at times, the more radical “ghostliness” of Benjaminian collecting.

1.4 The Trail of the Ghost: Benjaminian Collecting and Unsettling Times

To Walter Benjamin, as a Marxist sympathiser concerned with the way “the tradition and its receivers” could become “a tool of the ruling classes” (Benjamin, “Theses” 255), collecting had radical implications. As I discuss below, Benjaminian historical materialist collecting engages with a ghostly heritage in ways that preclude the option of safely erasing the past or containing it at a distant point on a receding timeline.

In Western, European contexts, notions of the past have underpinned the authority of the present in various ways. According to the historian David Lowenthal, in his influential text *The Past is a Foreign Country*, “[d]uring most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present…chroniclers portrayed bygone times with an immediacy and intimacy that reflected the supposed likeness” (Lowenthal, *The Past* xvi). Scott McQuire, in his study of the relationship between photographic technology and modernity, notes that, “[i]n the nineteenth century, the past began to be conceived in terms of its inexorable dislocation from the present, and the present began to be defined through the prism of a discipline capable of focusing the past” (McQuire 121). In each case, the validity of the dominant paradigms and discourses remains unchallenged.

This sense of the past’s enduring presence also, paradoxically, ensures its secure distance from the stable viewpoint of the present. In Western culture, distance became an important metaphor for the values of objectivity and
neutrality during the Enlightenment period, and again during the consolidation of history as an academic discipline during the nineteenth century. At this time, the disciplines of history and science were dominated by a powerful (although far from homogeneous or consistent) agglomeration of post-Enlightenment philosophical and political ideas, and by influences from a wide range of sources including the natural sciences (for instance, the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin) and imperial politics.

The resulting discourses and practices (including collecting for the purposes of science and history) were usually characterized by the “systematic denial of the importance of subjectivity” (McQuire 35). They often featured a confidence in positivist theories of knowledge; and sometimes a teleological view of history as a record of human progress, popularized by the influential German historian Leopold von Ranke (Burrow 464-466). In this context, the collecting of heritage items also became increasingly important. As conventionally understood, heritage entails the conservation and transmission of something of value, whether this is an artefact or knowledge. It implies stability and continuity.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that the collecting of heritage items became particularly popular in the twentieth century as a response to the rapid changes and uncertainties of modernity, because “genealogical trees, grandfather clocks, and cluttered ware of a local museum...suggest that our identity, far from being...transient and elusive...is fixed in extensive time and space” (472). Benjaminian collecting represents an exception to this. Benjamin responded to modernity by affirming the value of heritage and tradition, but in ways that overturned the conventional understanding of these concepts. Although he wrote that renewing the old world “is the collector’s deepest desire” (Benjamin, “Unpacking” 61), in the context of Benjaminian collecting theory, this renewal involves a dialectic through which, ultimately, no particular “story” is privileged, controlled or owned.
Benjaminian historiography rejects the claim made by the past upon its successor — the retrospective sense of an inevitable chain of causes and effects — and the linear temporal sequence of past, present and future that narrative implies. He regarded collecting as a profoundly significant alternative to historical narrative. In his famous but arguably unfinished and challenging historical work, the *Arcades Project*, he attempted to rely almost entirely on collecting, mainly in the form of textual citations and the enigmatic concept of the “dialectical image”. The dialectical image is a catalyst for a sudden alteration in perception, a transient revelation, and is attributed by Benjamin to the concrete and material juxtapositions that emerge through collecting, particularly in the form of citations and quotations (Buck-Morss 70; Richter 4-5).

By these means, the supremacy of any tradition or heritage is continually interrupted, and past and present are related in ways that evoke the restless indeterminacy of haunting, and its melancholy reiteration of loss. The Benjamin scholar Gerhard Richter observes that there are “many figures and motifs of ghosts and phantoms throughout [Benjamin’s] entire oeuvre”, and that the “structure of…ghostliness or spectrality is encoded throughout Benjamin’s writings” (3-4), particularly through his use of collecting.

Benjaminian historical materialist collecting favoured particular methods or tactics and even content (cultural detritus and remnants). To counter the totalising effect of theories, systems, and historical narratives, he emphasized the fragmentary, the concrete and contingent. For Benjamin, collecting involved “blasting” or shattering the continuum of history (Benjamin, “Theses” 163). As sociologist Avery Gordon notes, this “blasting” process allowed the historical materialist collector to follow the “trail the ghost leaves, picking up its pieces, setting them down elsewhere. “Blasting might be conceived as entering through a different door, the door of the uncanny...the
fragment...along the lines of a defamiliarization coalescing into a moment of connection” (Gordon 66).

These ideas influence my discussion in the following three chapters, as I explore some of the ways that, in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels, collecting’s links with the uncanny respond to and expose the complex and sometimes internally conflicted rhetoric (historical precedence versus “terra nullius”; nature and culture, garden and wilderness; birthright versus stewardship; continuity versus renewal) which characterizes the discourse of heritage and place in colonial and post-colonial environments. In Benjamin’s view of collecting, there is a ghostly indeterminacy about the relationships between collector and collected, historian and hi/story, and past and present. I will argue that a similar sense of the uncanny also characterizes many of the collecting examples in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s texts, and contributes to their temporally subversive and spatially unsettling implications.
2. THE WILDNESS BEYOND: Insiders, Outsiders and Collectors in Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book*

In this chapter, I examine how, in *The Garden Book*, Brian Castro uses motifs of collecting to examine ideas about the power of desire as language’s driving force, and to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of language, narrative, and historical representation, while also providing a critique of the notions of identity that underpin xenophobia and parochialism. I refer to Walter Benjamin as well as to post-structuralist perspectives on language and deconstructions of the relationship between inside and outside, and to Susan Stewart’s Lacanian-influenced interpretation of collecting, to show that, although its connection with ghosts remains mainly at the level of metaphor, the collecting motif in Castro’s text remains closely linked to the uncanny through its close association with imagery and metaphors of garden and wilderness. I contend that Castro’s uses of collecting motifs contribute significantly to his exploration of the implications of foreignness as a linguistic "heritage" rather than a marginal condition, and also offer some important general insights into the potential of motifs of materiality, particularly collecting, to provide entrance- ing interventions into representations of history.

Collecting has a central role in *The Garden Book*. The novel’s main narrator, Norman Shih, is a professional and private collector; a rare books librarian and archivist whose searches for his family history take him on collecting “detours”, “hunting phantoms” in his family’s past (Castro 6) through the half-wild, half-urbanized rainforest of the Dandenong Ranges region in south-eastern Victoria. Using narrative viewpoints that alternate between the contemporary era and the early-twentieth century world of Shih’s Chinese-Australian mother Swan, her husband Darcy (another collector), and her
American lover, Castro explores the complex and compelling significance of heritage in a society still substantially defined by a colonial past and by an enduring xenophobia. Castro uses collecting as a recurrent but often ambiguous and multivalent motif, and as a more pervasive textual strategy, which contributes to an eclectic and multi-layered text that, at times, also tends to “displace” the reader, but also proffers the notion of “hopeful work” as a tentative response to the problems of historical representation and of heritage (in all its senses). His novel evokes a strong sense of place (both historical and geographical), but in conjunction with his collecting references, the images and metaphors of garden and wilderness also evoke displacement, ambiguous boundaries, haunting losses and ghostly recurrences. As I discuss below, this has important implications for his novel’s themes.

2.1 The Hungry Ghosts: Dispossession and Displacement

Castro portrays the Dandenong Ranges as an equivocal and ambiguous place where the hardships of the subsistence farmer overlap disconcertingly with the modern world of holiday resorts and tourism, and urban and rural worlds intersect. In this milieu of change and uncertainty, notions of heritage acquire new and sometimes dangerous urgency, exemplified by his protagonists’ experiences of dispossession and displacement. The theme and motif of collecting has an important role in Castro’s depiction of these issues. For instance, Norman Shih’s collecting activities offer clues to his father’s identity and his mother’s life, and also provide the evidence to “mount a legal case for the resumption” (Castro 314) of the cottage (his mother’s former home) that he rents on the mountainside. However, this collecting involves far more than simply reclaiming his family heritage: it also uncovers some more subtle forms of dispossession, with profound implications.

The forms and causes of dispossession and displacement in *The Garden Book* vary widely, from the effects of legalized discrimination to more subtle,
personal losses. In his role as librarian/curator, Shih’s collecting is focused on the gathering of material for an officially sanctioned exhibition, intended to restore a long-forgotten poet of uncertain identity (Swan Hay/Jasper Zenlin) to the national literary canon. However, it gradually becomes evident that the material he collects also relates to his own past, and especially to the troubled life and mysterious disappearance of his Chinese-Australian mother, Swan (Shuang He), many decades earlier.

Swan’s disappearance is revealed as part of a complex process of dispossession, beginning with a loss of her family heritage, when her Chinese relatives are excluded from land ownership and citizenship, and are ultimately expelled from Australia. Swan’s fate is induced partly by her relationship with her increasingly possessive, racist, and violent husband, Darcy Damon, also a collector, whose own story is revealed or reconstructed through Shih’s collecting. Darcy’s collecting of books is entwined with his efforts to reclaim and reconstruct his identity and position in the social world of Depression-era rural Australia.

Through Darcy’s, Swan’s and Norman’s stories, Castro builds a picture of the structural and other social mechanisms of exclusion that have underpinned Australian nationalism. *The Garden Book* is set partly in the 1930s. At this time, the crises of war and Depression and associated political developments, such as the rise of socialist and labour movements and Fascism, gave renewed urgency to the “ongoing debates about nationhood” that accompanied and followed Federation (Duggan xxi). The consequences, as Castro shows, included an increasingly militant enforcement of racist government policies. In *The Garden Book*, Swan’s Australian-Chinese father, Baba, muses:

> For years...my father, grandfather and their people went back and forth freely between Australia and China...We brought industry, trade and culture...Then came the restrictions. No freehold land, no bank loans, our labour boycotted. The day Australia woke to a national identity, it fell asleep on the thorn of racial prejudice. (Castro 229)
These contests for power and identity also influence Darcy Damon’s attempts to reclaim his family’s land and his progress from socialist/landless labourer to capitalist/guesthouse owner. His increasing militarism and xenophobia accompany a changing attitude to Swan, while Swan’s trajectory, in contrast, is one of declining health, increasing isolation, and eventual disappearance, leaving few traces for her son and heir, Shih, to collect.

Swan’s physical disappearance is paralleled by her elusiveness in the historical record. Few of her poems, written on natural materials such as leaves and bark, remain:

> Her leafy analects do not exist any more. They were only meant to last a leaf’s lifetime. The rest was up to nature. Like Moses’ shattered tablets, her work would have to be recalled in memory and to speak it would be to lie. There were so many lies it is impossible to point to any original. She had finally written the book that caused her disappearance. (Castro 271)

Her son eventually concludes that she “simply wasn’t on any manifest” (Castro 314). The word “manifest” in Shih’s comment also forms a link to the opening passages of Castro’s novel, which begins with a description of a plane crash memorial — one of the sites of narrator Norman Shih’s collecting activities. Investigating the site, Shih notes discrepancies in the official records about the number of passengers killed in the crash: “Somebody’s got it wrong…I’ve checked the old flight manifests…All of this is tangential to my investigation. I’m simply searching for two missing people” (Castro 4).

The physical ephemerality of much of Swan’s private writing is paralleled, paradoxically, by the fate of her surviving work: the collection and publication of Swan’s poems in a somewhat ambiguous act of appropriation by her American lover, aviator and architect Jasper Zenlin, also threatens Swan with dissolution by (or into) the discourses of race and gender. Swan’s absence from history is reminiscent of both the strategic and structural historical
“silences” mentioned in *The Hanging Tree* and *The White Earth*, and Shih’s collecting of clues reveals some of the ways that these forces, which rendered Swan both unknown and, ultimately, unknowable, are intertwined.

Castro seems to suggest that Swan’s absence has some far-reaching and profound implications, related to, and paralleled by, the structural language and representation. For instance, *The Garden Book* opens with Norman Shih’s visit to a plane crash site, as part of his search for clues to his mother’s life, although, typically, its connection to Swan is only “tangential”. This reference to the plane crash (one of several in the novel) offers an echo of one of the novel’s two epigraphs, a quotation from a letter written by Franz Kafka:

“Written kisses don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts” (Kafka qtd in Castro, np). Kafka’s words, although inspired by the technological and spatial changes of modernity, also reiterate a much older concern; the perceived “loss” of authenticity and presence that occurs in language, whether spoken or written, salvaged historical record or private and ephemeral poem.

In Kafka’s letter, crashing is a metaphor for the persistent failure to “eliminate the ghostly element between people” and to achieve “natural” communication, or presence (Kafka qtd in Castro np). It is, Kafka claims, to resist this persistent failure to bridge the distance between subject and object, self and other, that humanity has invented modern transport and communications technology. Writing is the first ally of the ghosts, but Kafka also lists the “telephone” and the “radiograph”, media that involve speech, and “the railway, the motorcar, the aeroplane”: transport that allows direct access. However, this too fails, because they are invented at “the moment of crashing”: “the ghosts won’t starve, but we will perish” (Kafka qtd in Castro, np).
Castro’s own use of the Kafka quotation raises questions pertaining to this problem. One common function of an epigraph is as a “clue” to the riddle of the text, or a key to an overall meaning: it directs the gaze (like Harry Kitchings’ camera lens in Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds*). For example, motifs from Kafka’s citation appear throughout *The Garden Book* (including references to letters, crashes, cars, aeroplanes, and the postal service). In one way, the epigraphs act as an appeal to an authority and as an authorisation of the ideas in the novel.

However, the source of this authority may be questionable, given that it is derived from an extract from a private letter written in the time of the novel’s setting (the early twentieth century), but cited in such a different cultural and theoretical context, juxtaposed with a second epigraph (a quote from Auden), and read in the context of Castro’s text and the conventions of the book form. If, though, as foreshadowed in his own letter, Kafka’s “real” intention or original meaning does not survive this dislocation in time and space, if the “hungry ghosts” have devoured it, what authority could possibly be found in the “host” text? And what are the consequences for any attempt to learn about the past?

These issues are at stake in Castro’s allusions to collecting, nature, place, and history, and resonate in his novel through the more visceral and political themes of dispossession, discrimination and displacement. He draws on many sources and on complex metaphorical associations between nature, collecting, language and knowledge to gradually unfurl collecting’s uncanny qualities and its potential (as well as some of its shortcomings) for addressing the problems of heritage and historical dispossession. While Kafka’s ghosts defeat human attempts to communicate, the ghostly potential of Benjaminian collecting is, paradoxically, the source of its capacity to sustain “tradition” and “heritage”.

The vivid imagery and the volatility of the prose of *The Garden Book*, its seemingly inexhaustible intimations of other texts and new possibilities for interpretation, recalls aspects of Benjamin’s collecting practices (Castro himself says the book is about collecting “in a very Benjaminian sense” (“Unpacking Castro’s Library” 33)). For instance, Benjamin’s influence may be traced through Castro’s occasional use of direct citations of others’ texts and images. It also emerges in his often challenging prose, where a deceptively fluid narrative quality often camouflages a more staccato and discontinuous construction of point and counterpoint (or detours and returns); techniques that were central to Benjamin’s work (“[t]hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well” (Benjamin, “Theses” 262)).

Castro’s deployment of collecting as a motif and a strategy, in combination with his subtle but persistent allusions to motifs of garden and wilderness, also echoes Benjamin’s aims insofar as it tends to work against any totalising effect. It offers an almost overwhelmingly luxuriant array of possible interpretations of the text and plays an important role in opening opportunities for — as the critic Bernadette Brennan notes — a dialogue with “ghosts” (Brennan 175), a multi-vocality that also has implications for the historically dispossessed, potentially disrupting the supremacy of any given group or “voice”. Nevertheless, as I discuss below, Benjamin’s influence is still strong, and is perhaps most evident through Castro’s attention to the particularities of place and its relationship with the destructive and reconstructive processes associated with collecting.
2.2 Collecting in the Garden

Later, I will consider some of the ways that Castro’s text diverges or detours from Benjaminian collecting; but firstly, I will discuss how, in *The Garden Book*, collecting’s value is closely related to a Benjaminian appreciation of its concrete, material aspect. In this text, the topography and the particular temperate rainforest environment of the Dandenongs — its cryptic terrain and exuberant organic processes — are closely linked to the collecting motifs. These associations are most obvious in Castro’s references to the effects of environmental processes (weathering, decay, fire, clearing, cultivation or conservation) on collected items and collecting activities. They also emerge metaphorically, through images of enclosure and exposure, or growth, fruitfulness and dispersal. These linkages are also crucial to Castro’s ambivalent portrayal of place and its role in the discourses and histories that in various ways marginalize Darcy, Swan and Shih.

Collecting, whether of artefacts or textual citations, involves an engagement with material presence, which carries a range of implications: it may offer, for instance, a sense of possession and mastery with metaphysical as well as tangible dimensions. However, Benjamin’s interpretation utilizes collecting’s engagement with materiality in a very different way, which Castro’s own use of the “concrete” tend to support. For instance, the importance of materiality and concrete specificity is reinforced by Castro’s portrayal of place, despite its complex and often-equivocal implications in Castro’s text.

*The Garden Book* has been praised for its qualities of vivid realism, due not only to its rich imagery and detail but also because it provides a sense of engaging with the physical presence of an individual place “utterly unlike other, more ‘iconic’ landscapes in Australian fiction” (Clausen, np.), and in some ways such praise is justified. The novel opens, for instance, with a description of one of Shih’s collecting forays across a mountainside in the
Dandenongs. The effect is as if a reader or narratee is addressed directly; commanded to “see”; even to participate in the walk through the forest: “See here...But look closely...Go down further” (Castro 4).

As well as evoking a sense of immediacy, the imagery in *The Garden Book* depicts a very particular and specific landscape; a place of berry farms, sawmills and jam factories, razor wire and rubbish, ferny gullies, skinks and lyrebirds. Insofar as *The Garden Book* diverges from some of the more common and “iconic” settings (such as city or bush, coast or inland) and spatial tropes in Australian literature, it can be argued that this geographical unexpectedness heightens the reality effect of the text, transcending conventions, and revealing the untidy diversity of the “real” Australia.

However, the sense of place that Castro develops in his novel involves more than realism: it is ambivalent, complex and often seems to place in question the very possibility of such transparency, of writing such “presence”. Amid the realist textures of some of his place-writing, for instance, it is possible to detect a slightly self-reflexive element, in his allusions to Australia’s “iconic” landscapes. For instance, real-life landscape painters and Australian writers, including Tom Roberts (Castro 59) and Mrs Aeneas Gunn (Castro 304), feature indirectly in Castro’s text; mentioned in passing as residents of the Dandenongs and neighbours of Castro’s characters.

The allusions to these writers and artists, whose work has formed core components of myths of Australian identity, serve as a backdrop to representation of place that differs markedly from these myths. As a semi-rural district on the edge of a large city, the Dandenongs are a transition zone. In both Swan’s and Darcy’s eras (the interwar period of the twentieth century) and in Shih’s time, more than half a century later, they are a heterogeneous and haunted place. The hills are scarred along the “frontier’s line” and the new bitumen roads, and marked by the cross-cutting of the city and the bush, of
modernity and tradition, and the local’s (insider’s) world and the foreigner’s and the tourist’s (outsider’s) world. Castro places these experiences of place in the context of changes on a global scale, including historically specific social and cultural developments like the effects of various forms of modernisation, which brought, to the rural seclusion of the rugged Dandenongs region in the early twentieth century, an invasion of roads, aeroplanes, tourists, and holiday homes.

*Place, Displacement and Dispossession*

The double-edged character of an attachment to place emerges in many ways in Castro’s text. As his Kafka epigraph suggests, the changing spatial relationships caused by developments in transport and communications during the early twentieth century added to a more profound sense of the losses incurred by the modernising world. These included (for some critics) the perceived disappearance of absolutes, of stability, tradition, and connections to a past that was closely identified with particular places (for instance the agrarian communities of pre-industrial times). In defensive response to these changes, increasing xenophobia was often fuelled by reactionary concepts of place defined by, as geographer Doreen Massey observes, “simple counterposition to the outside” (155).

In *The Garden Book*, examples of this xenophobia are evident in the increasing isolation of Baba and Swan, who must confront the effects of the White Australia policy; the expulsion of Australia’s Chinese population, and the racist militia known as the “White Guard”, as well as more subtle forms of discrimination. Ironically, too, the qualities of nurturing, “husbandry” and respect for place which initially bond Darcy and Swan and lead to their respective efforts to conserve the Dandenongs environment are also easily identified with the concepts of authenticity, purity, and preservation which underpin racism and aggressive nationalism.
It is possible to draw some parallels with the issues to which Benjamin responded when developing his later work, amid the ominous social unrest of interwar Germany. Castro’s characters Norman Shih and Darcy Damon are, like Benjamin, book collectors, their collecting marked by the social and political events of their respective eras. Darcy’s collecting, in a period that overlaps with Benjamin’s, is informed initially by his experiences as a disenfranchised labourer in Depression era Australia. However, it later becomes a strategy, accompanying his increasing militarism and xenophobia, for his acceptance in the community as a successful businessman.

Castro’s novel also emphasizes that these experiences and concepts of place remain powerful in a contemporary context. For instance, Shih’s encounters with his fellow citizens’ prejudice and suspicion indicate that xenophobia still marks Australian nationalism. He speaks, referring to his passport, of “visas and birthplaces and all the fancy laser logos they use to guarantee selfhood”; and of how at Immigration in Melbourne, “they kept me two hours” (Castro 284-285).

In Norman Shih’s section of the narrative, set almost a century later than Darcy and Swan’s era, the images of “razor wire” and Rottweilers in the garden setting of the Dandenongs (Castro 2) create an atmosphere of suspicion and defensiveness; a suggestion that place in Australia is still too often defined against a threatening “outside”. Shih observes, towards the novel’s end, that his mother, Swan, “didn’t really belong in a country trying to write its history under the rubric of race. I still feel this, fifty years later, living in the same district” (Castro 309). Shih’s search for his missing mother’s story unearths complex questions about identity and representation, and undermines the possibility of confidence in presence and place (historical or spatial).
It is in response to these problems of disinheritance, dispossession and displacement, in all its senses, that Shih turns to collecting, asserting that:

Collecting is a form of knowledge which allows a closer representation of the dead than history or narrative...it’s an exact science because we are dealing with objects and not abstractions, and like most sciences, the collection of objects provides arbitrary closure, physical results — shapes, odours, touch — in order to claim authority. (Castro 7)

In Castro’s text, the power of objects takes many forms. The material world, for example, offers the moment of enchantment experienced by Darcy when, considering the merits of the house he has built, and having lamented the way that his reading seemed to leave him with only “meaning, without significance” (60), he finds himself reconsidering the relationship between words and things.

In a passage that seems at first to recall the romantic aspirations towards organic unity that characterized the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the sober delight and spiritual connotations of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s famous poem “Pied Beauty”, Darcy imagines the enchantingly complex network of linkages that underpins his house. He names, almost reverently, the craftsperson’s tools: “a Michigan Pattern Double Bit...adze marks acquired by a Birkinshaw’s No. 2 with a square pole Australian Pattern’ (Castro 59).

His house, he notes, “has been shaped by hand and retains a human feel”, in contrast with the artificiality of the “machine-sawed” mill wood used in a more commercial structure, where “[i]ts virtues are manufactured by words: abundant description, invented terminology. Word-joinery dovetails into the wood” (Castro 59). The house’s connections extend even further: it is linked to other trades and crafts, and beyond the human world to animals: carriage building (“wrought with hollow augers, hoop drivers and cooper’s froses” 60), blacksmithing: “ anvils, flogging hammers, pincers, clenchers, rasps and parers.
And all this goes with humble sweat and blankets and steaming dung and is just as tensioned and precise as any complex flying machine, when you consider the totality of it. The interdependence is sacramental” (Castro 60).

However, the link that emerges between the stability of the house and the mobility promised by the stable’s paraphernalia is a reminder that there is an “entrance-ing”, as well as enchanting, dimension to the exhilarating intricacy of these images of connectedness. For instance, Darcy observes that not all connections are immediately visible: there are “buried kinships”, and “nothing is as it appears when the right word is used” (Castro 60). The “right word” is right not because it “dovetails” into wood, sign and signifier tightly laminated, but because of a looser fitting — its meaning is functional and contingent rather than objectively given; it is not visible, because it is not present (it depends on other acts and things), but it still supports a structure. Collecting, in The Garden Book, also evokes this elusive quality: it involves excavating “buried kinships” — and, according to the ambiguous temporality in the syntax of Castro’s sentence — perhaps finding things that are not there yet: “examining all the layers and layers of what there is still to be discovered” (Castro 316). In this way, it is again reminiscent of Benjamin.

Benjamin’s writing is often cryptic and sometimes puzzling, but it seems that he believed that the mediating effect of narrative, and the sense of linear progress with which it was associated, were obstacles to an understanding of the structure of real historical change. The basis for this change was evident in textual citations, images or material objects, collected as by-products or side effects of hegemonic discourses and ideologies. In Benjamin’s view, the value of the object’s material qualities included its capacity to bear the marks of its past and, therefore, indications of its potential for further transformations and recontextualisations. The job of the historical materialist collector was to remain alert to the moments of fracture when these objects could be detached from their ideological, discursive or social contexts.
Traditionally the collecting of heritage is often regarded as an act of salvage or rescue. It usually involves preservation or conservation; collectors stabilize and enclose their treasures in libraries and museums, behind walls, in catalogues and descriptions. To some extent, the collection’s physical containment is often associated with a sense of temporal containment, although as Stewart comments, the collecting processes of acquisition, display, storage, and public and private ownership involve a complex social, temporal and spatial “dialectic of inside and outside” (154). To Benjamin, as to most collectors, collecting is a form of possession and is thus very much about containment — “the locking of individual items within a magic circle” (Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library” 60).

However, as I have mentioned earlier, in a Benjaminian context the possessive act of collecting has very different implications from the usual concepts of collecting and possession. Below, I discuss how some of these implications become evident in Castro’s portrayal of collecting and containment, especially in his emphasis on the way that collecting releases ghosts and evokes an unstable and uncanny relationship between inside and outside — whether this is in the form of garden and wilderness, garden and house, house and library, text and book, or word and thing.

In the context of Benjamin’s views on writing and history, collecting involved a technique of citation, where old material was valued, but only insofar as the rescue or salvage of an object is considered less an act of preservation than a fresh start. Thus collecting — citing, quoting, removing from context — is, in Benjamin’s view, a productive form of destruction. Phillipe Simay glosses Benjamin: citation “is in opposition to all that the text strives to unify” (145); “[d]iverting these fragments of thought from their primary significations and destinations, citation opens up for them a different destiny. It makes their own content exploitable and hence transmissible” (Simay 146).
Although it may be assumed that the salvaging of an object (like McIvor’s collection of ruins and relics in Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*) merely confirms time’s linearity and tradition’s continuity, some critics, including Benjamin, consider that historical collecting is more than simply a reflection of a pre-existing state. For instance, the selection of an item as a historical source may “presuppose” or construct a story, by giving the item a meaningful place in a chain of events — that is, establishing its origin, present fate, and prospects (Griffiths 25)). Benjamin argued that historical “transmission” and heritage (“the tradition”) could have another form, one that does not support the notion of history as progress through a “homogeneous, empty time” (“Theses” 263). Collecting the material of this heritage, though, is not a simple matter of conforming to existing systems of acquisition. It is to some degree oppositional, involves travel, exploration and a tactical approach, and is as much a part of the heritage value of the object as the item itself. Even the most straightforward form (purchasing) involves, for a “true collector”, strategic forays: a “wide highway, but not a comfortable one” (Benjamin, “Unpacking” 62).

Some of the collecting examples in Castro’s text exemplify both conceptions of heritage and possession. To some extent, Shih and the other main collector in *The Garden Book*, Darcy Damon, exemplify the Benjaminian notion of collecting as salvage. Darcy, for example, gathers, for careful rebuilding, debris from a burned house, and Shih rescues truckloads of discarded library books and ephemera. However, their collecting also has other implications.

Darcy’s house-building project, for example, bears some obvious marks of collecting. In the early sections of *The Garden Book*, Darcy, trying to replace the heritage that he was denied (by the Shire, by family misfortune and mismanagement, by social and political circumstances), finally stakes a claim to some land and reconstructs, for himself, the burnt-out and “haunted” ruins of the house of his former employer, the notorious Melbourne gangster
“Squizzy” Taylor. Darcy re-fashions his new home in a form of bricolage, supplemented by artefacts and bits and pieces of knowledge gleaned from his travels and collecting ventures. This involves much collecting, particularly the salvaging, reshaping, and gathering of building materials: “He laboured each day, salvaging good timber and replacing beams. He tried to remember exactly how the architecture of the place was laid out, what lumber was used, where the windows were... [he] blended and reshaped material to create the original scheme” (Castro 48).

Darcy’s salvaging, despite his efforts to follow the original plan, creates a whimsical and idiosyncratic house, a Chinese-Australian hybrid structure, from the charred remains and rubble. Like Castro’s text, it is hospitable yet also resistant to easy access (Castro 56, 72-73). It is not, however, a secure refuge: its design includes some ominous signs (Swan observes that it is “all straight lines...And all those sharp, steep gables. A bad sign in Chinese divining. It means fire” Castro 75), and although it is a “new” structure, Darcy eventually realizes that it is still considered haunted by the locals who remember when the original building burned down, killing some women imprisoned inside. Darcy Damon’s eclectic construction methods share some of the qualities of deflection and discontinuity of Benjaminian collecting, and his failure either to reproduce the old building, or to escape the past completely, gives his house a certain temporal and spatial ambiguity.

However, Darcy’s collecting, despite its promising beginnings, soon reverts to a more conventional format, aided by his discovery of a sinister hidden collection of sorts, a gangster’s stash hidden beneath a rock in the centre of the house. Although the discovery makes the house feel “even more haunted”, he refuses to move it: “Upon this rock, my future...I squared my debts...went down to the bookstore...and offered to buy all her stock...By midnight I had it all shelved, chronologically, and knew I had a treasure worth more than what I paid” (Castro 66). Benjamin’s concerns about collecting and
heritage are exemplified by the way that Darcy Damon’s once liberating book-collecting becomes an instrument of oppression:

He began to drive all over the countryside in search of rare books...He was a Renaissance Man who didn’t read. He judged a book by its age, by its feel and by its smell. The bargains he found he brought home. The guest house library grew dignified, laden with golden volumes in walnut cabinets. A new sign went up...Mon Bibliomane /Weekend Guest house /Rare Book Treasury /Walk and Read in Woodland Setting (Castro 127)

To Benjamin, the true collector’s customary failure to read the collected books is an indication of a more historically significant preoccupation with the item’s specific background and fate; in Darcy’s context, however, it is a sign of the commodification of the collectable.

Darcy’s not reading the books indicates that his collecting, becoming commercial, has “lost its personal owner” — which, on Benjamin’s account, indicates that it has lost its meaning (Benjamin, “Unpacking” 67). Rather than a bricoleur’s assortment of fragments, Darcy’s house becomes a library encasing a canon of “treasures”, testifying to the usual way that history, according to Benjamin, is imagined: a “triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostate...the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures” (Benjamin, “Theses” 258).

Unlike the collecting of Darcy Damon, Norman Shih’s collecting activities more strongly affirm the value of various forms of interruption, deviation or fragmentation, whether in the form of the collected items (detritus, discarded remnants) or the collecting process itself. As I will discuss below, through these and other collecting examples, Castro provides some glimpses of the uncanny and “entrance-ing” characteristics that undercut projects of possession, whether historical, spatial or metaphysical.
2.3 Inside and Outside: The Place/s of Collecting

Towards the novel’s conclusion, Norman Shih, shelving and filing his book collection “lovingly and incorrectly”, shakes loose a “pressed leaf” (perhaps the leaf from Swan’s dream of Eden (Castro 300). Castro writes, of Shih’s act of “shelving” his collection (to “shelve” is colloquially to put aside), that the leaf “falls out, scything through the air and planning onto the floor, thus marking the spot of time on the road which can never lead us back, where ghosts which have broken loose are now wandering” (Castro 315).

In this poetically dense (and very citable) sentence, Castro juxtaposes and overlaps images of collecting, time and space: scythes, with their associations with reaping, mortality and time; and planes, with their vehicular and spatial denotations. This sentence is itself a collection of metaphors that seem to draw together many of Castro’s themes and concerns in one “place”, yet it also destabilizes this place through its sense of intense semantic movement and indeterminacy. A similar but more complex sense of placement and displacement (unsettled, sometimes uneasy; involving more than a simple juxtaposition of inside and outside) is invoked by Castro’s use of the garden motif and its associated imagery, alongside his deployment of collecting as a Benjaminian catalyst for subversion and historical justice.

This becomes evident through Castro’s references to the material vulnerability of collected objects and the way that the images of containment with which collecting is associated in his novel (books, walls, houses and gardens) are also sites of dispersal, destruction, detours, and ghostly crossings. It is also emphasized by Castro’s stress on the significance of the act of collecting, as well as the collection itself: the embodied (“asymmetrical”, “disabled”, exploratory, detouring (Castro 273)) experiences of his collector-characters.

As I have mentioned, one of the most obvious projects of emplacement and containment represented in Castro’s novel is the building of houses and
homes. In his text, the house may be portrayed as a collection in itself; or it may simply house collections, but it always has a complex imbrication with (or is haunted by) the garden/nature motif. In this context, the relevance of Benjamin’s more revolutionary notion of collecting and history, where “containment” has some unorthodox and apparently contrary connotations, becomes particularly apparent.

**An Excess of Interiors**

To Benjamin, the historical materialist’s collecting activities were a manifestation of a process of dialectical change, exemplified by the history of collecting itself as an activity associated with the concept of interiority. Castro, through his imagery of natural and built environments (for which the garden is a versatile metaphor), often seems to allude to some aspects of these ideas. For example, Castro juxtaposes Darcy, the collector/bricoleur, with his rival for Swan, the architect Jasper Zenlin, who arrives in the Dandenongs to supervise the construction of a client’s house. Jasper’s concern with nature, organic unity, purity and control variously contrast with, and highlight, the values and tactics of Benjaminian collecting.

Jasper’s house (like Darcy’s home, built from hand-hewn timber) invokes natural heritage — the forms and material of the Dandenongs — but to different effect: Jasper “was a holy man with stone. Stone felt pure and he wanted to design and build in purity so that everything dovetailed into nature” (Castro 179). This apparent veneration of nature was a common, if not homogeneous, theme in architecture and urban planning from the late nineteenth century to the interwar period. Urban planners and architects proposed new, utopian forms of urban development, especially the Garden City, imagined as a site of “order despite differentiation, [and] coherence and unity despite the need for growth” (Mumford 596). Such a city was to be
self-sustaining, with “the organic self-control and self-containment of any other organism” (Mumford 596).

While such a yearning for a more natural, pastoral past, which was popularized by the Arts and Crafts movement, may have been regarded as reactionary by Modernist designers, many of the garden city planners and architects also seemed to seek a fusion of nature and technology; a machine for living; a living machine. In some ways, the pursuit of organic unity in architecture was unwelcoming to the eclectic or esoteric tendencies of private collectors. Architectural historian Charles Rice, for instance, notes that Walter Benjamin contended, in his writings on the history of the “bourgeois interior”, that during the late nineteenth century, the “architect begins to assume the role of total designer, taking up the tectonic elements of new constructional forms, and naturalizing them with a distinctly animated and vegetal stylistic line”. He notes that the “individuality expressed within the interior shifts from being that of the inhabitant, mediated through collected objects, and becomes that of the architect-turned-artist, whose artistic ‘vision’ constricts the inhabitant” (Rice 173).

Although The Garden Book is set in a later period, Jasper’s designs are clearly reminiscent of this approach (“He said his architecture was organicist, interconnected wholes, linked into nature. She believed this to be a case of hubris” (Castro 194)). Similarly, Jasper’s relationship with Swan has a constricting effect on her life. Despite offering a sympathetic alternative to the increasingly brutal Darcy (who eventually evicts Swan from their home), Jasper, architect turned writer/editor, also displaces Swan: there is no room for her in his translations and exploitations of her poetry. There are some clear parallels with Benjamin’s (apparent) condemnation of the architect’s hegemony and the subsequent loss of the domestic interior, in which inhabitants of buildings create improvised, individual and potentially oppositional collections.
However, as is often the case in both Benjamin’s and Castro’s writing, this analogy is more complicated and less consistently applicable than it initially seems, not only in the parallels and contrasts between writers and collectors in each example, but also in terms of Benjamin’s attitude to architecture. For instance, Benjamin’s comments may seem to compare the architect’s uniform and holistic structure unfavourably with the collector’s individual agency and personal, eclectic creation of an interior environment — values that elsewhere Benjamin has, in various ways, associated with collecting’s radical potential. Yet, Rice suggests, Benjamin actually commended certain modern architecture, for its effect of “liquidating” the interior, challenging the assumption that the “interior” is a timeless and essential experience (Rice 173-175). The increased use of glass and steel in construction may have been a material condition of this effect (Benjamin qtd in Rice 174), but it is the result itself that Benjamin esteems, rather than any intrinsic quality of the architecture or notion of interiority and enclosure as a fundamental value for the collector. Rice notes that to Benjamin, the “encasing” function of the interior produces an effect of “mortification...Following the traces registered in the interior leads to something akin to the uncovering of a dead body” (Rice 173). It evokes the containment of something of static, of fixed value; and a timelessness that is anathema to subversive history.

Castro extends this notion to the book as a container and symbol of closure and completeness (as opposed to the text): “[a] book entombs its time”. However, the Benjaminian collector, observing the materiality of the book, its chance inscriptions, inclusions and marks of usage, and its lateral links to other objects, offers a key to releasing the book (and text) from the rigid context that produced them, and liberating the “gypsy” dead from this tomb (Castro 7). Benjamin’s own Arcades Project, with its collocations of images and textual fragments relating to the enclosed world of nineteenth century Parisian arcades, appears to have been an attempt to investigate the potential of this
process. Although Castro does not attempt to emulate this strategy, his text does contain many references to collecting as an expression of desire, as fatal in its way as Benjamin’s tomb-like “interior”. (Castro 193).

Moreover, Castro’s characters are quite closely associated with interiority — from Darcy’s enclosure of rare book treasures (an illusory fulfilment of desire), to Jasper’s relationship with Swan (a calculated indulgence in the impossibility of fulfilment). The latter stems from Jasper’s craving for the unattainable, which entails an insatiable interiority: “Like the ceiling height of a DC-2, there was no ‘outside’...It would forever hold him back from participating fully. He could have called it an excess of interiors” (Castro 193). As I will discuss later, there are some clues to Castro’s own strategic citations of Benjamin, in these oblique reminders of Benjamin’s dialectical approach to the relationship between historical collecting and the conceptual contingency and ephemerality of the “interior”.

*To Take Up Ghosts*

Many aspects of Castro’s depiction of houses, gardens and collecting relates, in part, to Benjamin’s concept of historical time, as well as to Castro’s own interest in the displacing effects of language. In *The Garden Book*, some of Castro’s (metaphorical) “ghosts” may refer not only to the lingering influence of the past (or to the loss of authorial presence entailed in communication — the “dead sender” mentioned by Kafka in one of the epigraphs to *The Garden Book*), but also to a more dynamic, Benjaminian, ghostly displacement or haunting of time.

Instead of regarding history as a “chain of events”, Benjamin argues that the “angel of history”, looking towards the past, sees “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise...This storm is what we call progress” (Benjamin
“Theses” 259-260). As I have mentioned, Benjamin contended that heritage resides not in the preservation of cultural treasures but in the catalytic potential of cast-off and overlooked remnants of the past, and collecting is much more than a relatively passive or receptive act of acquisition and preservation.

In his famous essay on book-collecting, “Unpacking My Library”, Benjamin echoes this view insofar as he notes that the telling characteristic of a true collector is the failure to read the books collected — the true pleasure and importance is in both the process and the moment of acquisition. Reading collected books is in some ways less important than appreciating their circumstances because, contrary to custom, Benjamin argues that what is contained is less the objects themselves than the “scene, the stage, of their fate”, and for the collector, “[e]verything remembered and thought...becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property” (Benjamin, “Unpacking” 60). In fact, to Benjamin, the collector is, in a way, collecting not simply the “background”, but the fate of the object — something that paradoxically is not yet determined until the moment of collection. Benjamin describes collectors as “interpreters” of fate — an activity akin to translation, which according to Benjamin, also has radical implications that challenge the possibility of preserving original meanings (Benjamin, “Translator” 69-82).

In The Garden Book, this aspect of Benjamin’s notion of collecting (and perhaps the approach of Castro’s novel itself) is also exemplified by Shih’s collecting, especially his circumlocutory methods and his focus on apparently irrelevant or obscure ephemera: “Letters, postcards, ledgers, old paperbacks...a job lot in an old tea chest” (Castro 7). Significantly, Castro’s first reference to Shih’s collecting accords with Benjamin’s affirmation of historical detritus: he examines not only the official memorial cairn at the plane crash site but the littered surroundings. The waste items — relics of intimacy, secrecy, of moments (on the edge of coherence and communicability) that
fracture the boundaries between the personal and the public — are “collected” in a detailed list: “little mounds of cigarette butts...Countless cairns of long-dead anxieties, burnt-out lusts, charred moments of fear...Ice cubes of broken glass. Two syringes. Seven used condoms” (Castro 2).

Confronted by the conflicting demands of his position as university librarian and archivist, and his personal quest for his family’s heritage, Shih faces an apparent choice: whether to “take up random ghosts”, or “to stick to classification, to being in control of the order of things” (Castro 286). His response in favour of the ghosts, though somewhat equivocal, is essentially reminiscent of Benjaminian collecting. However, Castro’s imagery resists neat parallels and correlations: his frequent references to collecting as a process of detours also evoke Derrida’s discussion of writing, representation and iterability, and his references to book collecting have numerous connotations which extend beyond Benjamin and draw attention in many ways to the problems of containment, possession and representation.

Books, Walls, and Gardens

Insofar as Shih’s collection is a library — both a collection and the housing of that collection — it is defined by walls, and Castro’s imagery of walls evokes relationships between inside and outside which encourage yet more detours. For instance, many of the novel’s key collecting and place related metaphors are linked to China, which itself has ambiguous connotations of interiority and externality: often imagined by Westerners as the exotic East, an alien Other or outside, it also gains some of its mystique from a sense of a hidden interior. This is epitomized by China’s most famous wall — and walls are another important and recurring image in The Garden Book, where along with other structures of containment, they offer echoes of Benjamin, as well as other texts and ideas.
Like his apparent namesake, the “first Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti [who] ordered the Great Wall erected”, Norman Shih has his own Great Wall. This “wall” encloses his private world and public collection of family secrets and discarded books, although he insists that his role is not that of “[h]igh priest, rabbi, guardian of the seals…I serve a greater purpose in the humblest fashion” (Castro 255)

It’s why the Rare Books department is such a rare institution...It’s a refuge for the disabled. Self-contained, it has been my fortress...The wall between this department and the rest of the university library is to keep others out, but it is in fact a Great Wall which has prevented the seepage of the dead into the world beyond, where they would be lost forever, cut off by politeness and silence, not daring to disturb the earth with a knowledge which only be disabling. (Castro 273)

When, as in the Emperor Shih’s regime, “old books are...discarded to make way for new ones” (Castro 256), Shih rescues or appropriates them, inconsistently and in Benjaminian fashion, gathering books

...which libraries all over the country have jettisoned...Sometimes in my aerie, I feed my fire with thick volumes, but mostly I store them in the shed...My Great Wall is also a tenuous memory, and like capitalism forgetting feeds on itself. (Castro 256)

The wall imagery also leads in the direction of one of The Garden Book’s particularly elusive metaphors, the garden, in ways that offer a range of significant links to Castro’s themes.

The garden is generally considered a place of life, and so ostensibly forms a contrast with Castro’s depiction of the library (house of books) or the book (house of the text) as a tomb (Castro 7) or place of the dead (Castro 273) — sites of fatal interiority. Texts themselves, however, like gardens, have a more ambiguous status, which becomes apparent in various ways through Castro’s novel. Despite his novel’s themes, Castro — perhaps in accordance with his often-oblique narrative technique — does not refer directly to the Chinese
tradition of gardening. However, there is ample scope for ironic allusion in his juxtaposition of images of the Dandenongs (the natural paradise that is reminiscent of the garden planted by “God...eastward in Eden” (“Genesis 2” *Holy Bible*)), with his references to China, an “East” (a metaphor which is itself “out of place”, compass-wise, when used in an Australian geographical context). The Chinese garden offers many metaphorical connections with the concepts of enclosure, containment, concealment and revelation that inform Castro’s deployment of the collecting motif in *The Garden Book*.

In the context of Western culture’s Orientalizing tendencies, for example, the Great Wall of China has long provided a useful image of foreignness, secrecy and difference, and the Chinese garden, likewise, traditionally evokes a similarly enclosed world. In his book on Chinese garden design, for instance, R. Stewart Johnston comments that Chinese culture has a reputation for resembling “a magic box containing many other boxes” (Johnston 1), a walled, enclosed configuration that he argues is reflected in traditional Chinese garden design. Even though the typical traditional Chinese garden reflected a deep appreciation of nature, it also had a strongly architectural and very hierarchical structure, which may readily be interpreted in ways that concur with the (Western) outsider’s perception of China as insular and enigmatic. For the middle to higher ranks of Chinese society, one of the central priorities and precepts for the urban garden was the creation of an environment conducive to “study and contemplation”, usually achieved through the construction of a landscaped space, usually carefully defined by walls, and containing, ideally, the “library garden house” (Johnston 302).

However, the boundaries between library and garden, representation and reality, are opened to question in a space where the garden itself was often inscribed with text: “verses written on boards providing literary meanings to many parts of the garden” (Johnston 43). The idea of reading in the garden, which is embodied by the Chinese library garden house in its garden of words,
has a range of connotations, which resonate through *The Garden Book* in various forms, drawing attention to the text as a place, as well as to the textuality of place.

2.4 Reading in the Garden

As Bernadette Brennan has noted, in Castro’s writing, language enters the world as a “sort of detour via the other and then returned back to a dead sender” (*Castro Looking for Estrellita* 118) and consequently it is “a novel in which the characters, landscape and writing are haunted by and in conversation with ghosts” (Brennan *Brian Castro’s Fiction* 175). Castro’s novel is haunted by a network of textual “detours” such as those that displace the centrality of Shih’s narrative, in the form of allusions to other texts and to historiographical conventions (footnotes, provenance of evidence, and graphic reproductions of “source material”), the use of scholarly non-fiction conventions such as footnotes, facsimile reproductions and citation of evidence. In some respects, this exemplifies some of the principles of Benjaminian collecting as a process of interruption.

Yet while Castro’s text harmonizes with Benjamin’s ideas in many ways, it is more equivocal about the opposition between collecting and narrative which was so important in Benjamin’s work. Castro still utilizes narrative extensively, often introducing the collecting motif through narrative references and metaphorical connections and rather than as a structural principle. His text also incorporates other perspectives and theories as well, including those of Jacques Derrida and — in the context of the garden motif (a garden first mentioned in the novel’s title but only obliquely “present” in the text) — Jacques Lacan. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider some of the ways that Castro’s text uses collecting to “entrance”, weaving back and forth between word and thing, between collecting as a principle and as a theme,
drawing the reader into the uncanny, haunted matrix (within and beyond) which is the text.

One such “ghostly detour”, for instance, could include the twentieth-century French scholar and cultural theorist, Michel de Certeau. In his influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau outlines a relationship between reader and text for which *The Garden Book* seems almost exemplary. De Certeau claims that reading is a potentially subversive activity, which exploits the text’s own unauthorized potentialities for destabilizing or displacing the narratives of the socially powerful. He is, for instance, critical of the way that texts are often accompanied by a “relationship of forces (between teachers and pupils, or between producers and consumers)” which “constitutes” the book as a “secret” of which “privileged readers” are “the ‘true’ interpreters” (171).

To a certain extent, a similar perspective to Benjamin’s is discernible in the collecting-related imagery used by Michel de Certeau when he critiques the structure of power that, de Certeau argues, is embedded in the ways that certain social and political institutions construct relationships between text and reader. He rejects the idea of the text (historical or otherwise) as a container for a jealously guarded heritage of meaning. Instead, he argues that the “…fiction of the ‘treasury’ hidden in the work, a sort of strong-box full of meaning, is…not based on the productivity of the reader, but on the social institution that overdetermines his relation with the text” (de Certeau 171). An encounter with de Certeau’s “ghost” is useful for both its parallels to, and its differences from, *The Garden Book*: it offers an approach from which some nuances of Castro’s (and Benjamin’s) ideas about texts and collecting may become more apparent.

There are, for instance, some parallels between the role of de Certeau’s reader, and that of the collector in both Benjamin’s and Castro’s texts. The
title of the chapter in which this comment occurs, “Reading as Poaching”, is also suggestive of the illicitness of Benjamin’s collecting. In some respects, de Certeau’s reader (who actually does collect or “collate” (de Certeau 172)), is reminiscent of Benjamin’s collector, rummaging through historical debris, for whom the flaring up of the dialectical image resembles, to a certain extent, the “passing-by” of a reading. There is even a fleeting reference to collecting, and to gardens, in his description of reading: “The reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world, like a Robinson Crusoe discovering an island” (de Certeau 173) — and Castro’s “garden book” is, in many ways, a reader’s garden.

According to de Certeau, the reader’s role is that of the traveller or nomad (174), and reading is the opposite of writing’s cumulative and place making properties. Reading (as a subversive activity) thus parts company from collecting, which in de Certeau’s terms is more closely aligned with writing, and with the notion of the written text as a “private hunting reserve” (171), a hoard maintained by and for a dominant social group. To de Certeau, reading resembles travelling or exploration, whereas writing involves the accumulation of meaning, the stockpiling of heritage. The reader intrudes on a textual territory. Writers, on the other hand, are “founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses”, and “[w]riting accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction.” (de Certeau 174). De Certeau describes the writer’s work as the building of houses; the “establishment of a place” for the cultivation and accumulation of meaning, a collection or hoard, which is then available to be breached by the nomadic, poaching reader (174).

There are possibly some fragmentary echoes of Michel de Certeau’s voice (“Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly” (de
Certeau 174)) in Castro’s references to Swan (she “was never one to hoard memories, and she could live without them. She was always anticipating. Living for the future; for others” (Castro 304)). However, Swan, significantly, is not simply a reader but also a writer. Castro’s references to the connections between place, writing and collecting differ from de Certeau’s by utilizing a more radical Benjaminian conception of collecting, in which rupture and dispersal is as important as enclosure and accumulation.

Insofar as Castro’s text is also a hunting ground of sorts (for Norman Shih, protagonist of Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book*, collecting involves “hunting phantoms”), it is so in a very different sense from the privileged territory where de Certeau’s reader “poaches”. Like de Certeau, Castro refuses the “assimilation of reading to passivity” (de Certeau 169), but Castro’s deployment of collecting and the garden metaphor (or, more precisely, the imagery with which it is associated in his text) ultimately problematizes some aspects of the notion of the text which emerges in de Certeau’s analogies of reading and writing.

*Fire, Fragments, and Gypsy Moths*

Another example of collecting’s role in Castro’s text’s multivocality emerges in his regionally inflected imagery of book collections. This imagery alludes to post-structuralist theory as it reveals yet another dimension of the garden motif’s inside/outside ambiguity. It once again draws attention to the indeterminate place of the text, while also pointing to the clues that collecting can provide for an alternative understanding of heritage and history.

In *The Garden Book*, an important aspect of collecting involves encounters not only with the artefact’s materiality but also with the physicality of the Dandenongs environment. Books, for example, are both collected items, and containers (of text), but are not obviously associated with the natural environment; bookish people live an indoor life. Books themselves are
relatively fragile and require shelter from the elements, yet are also expected to be permanent and reliable, unlike the variable and unpredictable natural world. However, they are connected metaphorically to this environment — pages are leaves, reading is leafing — and physically too; they are made from paper (when Darcy sells his second-hand books, some locals taunt him: “How come you’re so keen on books eh? Didn’t they come from dead trees?” (Castro 39).

Rain, mildew, and “weather and sunlight” (Castro 6) challenge Shih’s collections, and like the densely forested Dandenongs, they are also susceptible to damage from fire. In the forested setting of the Dandenongs, though, fire is a frequent threat, and in the text of The Garden Book, fire imagery is especially pervasive, drawing attention to the collectable’s materiality and its vulnerability to the contingencies of its environment. In the context of book collecting, flammability has a particular significance. In The Garden Book, the burning of books — a traditional sign of bigotry — has, as with most things in Castro’s novel, so complex and perhaps unexpected implications for the relationships between inside and outside, past and present, which underpin conventional perceptions of heritage collecting. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the fire motif may also be found in The White Earth, The Hanging Tree, and even The Service of Clouds, where it has important, if ambiguous, significance for the problems of representing place and history.

Fire is, perhaps, the antithesis of what collecting usually stands for: it destroys, erases, de-materialises; and to some extent, it has a cathartic effect, removing the burdens of the past. It destroys forests, “rending memory with enfilading fire” (Castro 2). References to fire occur in the first paragraphs, and subsequently recur throughout the text. Fire enables Darcy Damon to claim and rebuild “[a] charred wreck of a haunted house… [that] nobody wanted” (Castro 48). Fire shapes Norman Shih’s own bodily “heritage”, the burnt and paralysed arm that affects his gait and direction on his collecting forays (Castro
2). Fire also marks many of the collected items in *The Garden Book*: the “burnt remains of other times” (Castro 1), for instance, and the singed diary that Shih finds, a burned book which offers, very obliquely, a link with his ancient namesake.

Referring to the Emperor Shih, Shih comments that he “was a great builder. But he also commanded that all books before his time be burned” (Castro 254), and observes that,

> in cremating the dead again, as he called this book-burning, he not only disposed of the signs they left, those little restive signals that could make events uncertain and the world unstable, but he demolished the idea of legacy…There would be nothing after him but the deluge. Everything would have to be created anew. But he gleaned the books before he burned them. (Castro 255)

The Emperor’s logic, in burning books, is to “complete” the task started by act of enclosure; supposedly to destroy the possibility of dissemination and legacy, in which some other subject inherits that which supposedly belongs to (and thus guarantees) the self.

According to Derrida, whose work seems to “haunt” *The Garden Book*, an underlying premise of traditional metaphysics is the assumption that meaning, no matter how slippery, can ultimately be traced back to an original intent. It is assumed that, unlike writing, the spoken word or “vocal ‘letter’…would be indivisible, always identical to itself, whatever the fragmentations of its body”, and that “Fragmentation is an accident which does not concern it” (Derrida, “Le Facteur” 472). The “ideality” of the signifier depends on the idea of a closed circuit, where, in theory, the voice that speaks could hear itself speak, and is thus assured that the spoken word is replete, complete, with meaning. The circular structure of signification reverses the “dissemination” that has just been put in place, and allows one to “inherit from oneself”, like the Emperor Shih. Thus, in order to be able to signify and communicate with
someone else, it would be necessary to be “one’s own and only legitimate heir” (Kamuf, “Introduction to ‘Le Facteur’ ” 461).

To Norman Shih, though, the Emperor’s obsession with origins is a “hideous cargo” (Castro 255); a burden that he (Norman Shih) rejects, apparently citing both Derrida, and Benjamin’s image of the historical materialist’s “weak Messianic power” (Benjamin “Theses” 254):

[These reflections are to condemn the circular motion of history which has ruined my life, determined me, stuck me in a world which is a total library. I have to reject the return of the same; set myself free from the prison of my system. Only a messianic revelation can save me from the eternal merry-go-round of this totality, that nothing is lost in books. Only a soon-to-be revelation, an imminent discovery, a short circuit, can tell me that the world is exploding with secrets which will not come round again. (Castro 274)

In *The Garden Book*, such explosive incidents have many implications. Darcy, for instance, learns that a book collection can preserve its housing: “tightly shelved books don’t burn. But houses without books are different. The air rushes in; they explode. It’s why this memory is so combustive, like books with too much air in them” (Castro 46). The imagery of combustive memory and burning of books in Castro’s text is not necessarily only an indication of loss, however. Instead, it has connotations of both Derrida’s comments on writing and the divisibility of the signifier and Benjamin’s subversive collecting.

Burning, for instance, is reminiscent of the explosive, destructive force of Benjamin’s subversive history, as much as it also suggests negation and obliteration. Benjamin affirms not the preservation of “treasures” but discontinuity and interruption, fragmentation, disintegration and “wreckage” as the best form of historical transmission. The concrete attributes of the collectable cease to be ideal, and thus become valuable. The collected item, however durable, is susceptible to damage. Moreover, history does not progress, leaving a trail behind it: instead, it is an unpredictable switching of
paradigms: “[t]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin, “Theses” 257). This flashing up of an image also evokes the flaring up of fire.

Along with the burning of books, Castro also refers to other signs of damage and loss in many of the documents collected or referred to by Shih, including notebooks, scraps of paper, letters and postcards, and these images of damage in turn, evoke Derrida’s observations about the materiality of documents and the divisibility of the signifier. Derrida has commented that, because it is usually associated with closure and containment; with the possibility of totality, “[t]he idea of the book...is profoundly alien to the sense of writing” (Derrida qtd. in Kamuf “Introduction to ‘Of Grammatology’”, 32). Because of the “sensory and repetitive side of the recording”, Derrida notes, “the paper letter...can be divided or multiplied, destroyed or set adrift (since authentic originality is always already lost)” (Derrida, “Le Facteur” 479).

Derrida comments that it was traditionally assumed that, for any given sample of written language, the inadvertent failure to be legible, including the shredding or the non-arrival of a letter, was irrelevant to the identity (if not the fate) of the message it “carried”, which remained secure in meaning, a meaning underpinned by the sender’s intent.

Considering the “letter” as both a sign and a missive, Derrida argued that the possibility of a letter’s not arriving is not simply accidental and irrelevant. Instead, “it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat...the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the circuit can always not finish. Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier...It broaches...the unity of the signifier” (Derrida, “Le Facteur” 469). Similarly, a detour does involve a return to an original path, and in fact cannot happen without that original path (otherwise, it is no longer a detour). But, likewise, the idea of a direct route also suggests that the movement to a destination can always be deflected.
The indirect, tangential movement of Shih’s collecting is remote from the linear, cumulative procession of conventional concepts of heritage. It is marked by discrete segments as much as continuous lines – “more hermit crab than manta ray” (Castro 273) – and proceeds along detours: “Sideways over the sands of time, making connections; between the living and the dead. A sticky business” (Castro 273). Although his narrative begins at the plane crash site, “even the crash is an aside” (Castro 6), and the crash is tied to “a navigational discrepancy”: “I go out searching for important clues and then it’s not the clues which hold my attention, it’s all the detours” (Castro 6). The motif of the detour resonates with references elsewhere to the “sideways” movement of Shih’s collecting activities, to his physical disability, to “asymmetry”, and to paralysis and action. It also informs Castro’s environmental imagery (trees, leaves, forest fires, destruction, decay and regrowth), emphasizing that the relationships between the text and its material form have important consequences for notions of heritage and transmission.

The stories of Castro’s two main collectors, Darcy and Shih, intersect and connect with those of his other characters (particularly Swan and the architect Jasper Zenlin) and are in turn continually inflected and reflected by Castro’s own use of citations and allusions. Consequently, it becomes apparent that in *The Garden Book*, the line between inside and outside — like the line joining past and present — might be described as permeable, fragmented, even wayward. In this context, even walls are not to be trusted as means of containment: instead, they may also be a form of concealment and delay which is more “opening” than a road, insofar as walls prevent straightforward access — they cause detours.

Castro indicates that books or book collections cannot escape ghostly seepage, regardless of covers, systems of classification, or walls. If books preserve the words of the dead, they also “entomb” ghosts (the gypsy dead) — “signs...those little restive signals that could make events uncertain and the
History has missed a vital clue: the dead are gypsies. Still active, they flutter here and there, moths before the flames. With their painted fingernails they pull out cigarettes, underscore lines of poetry. They’ve left us these signs. Signs which make us what we are. You simply have to know how to collect them. You have to know the detours, that the whole idea of any story, like existence itself, is beside the point. (Castro 7)

2.5 A Detour through Paradise: Collecting, Desire, and Australian Identity

In considering how Castro’s uses of collecting in The Garden Book problematize traditional notions of historical representation, it is also useful to examine how his strategy also operates, more pragmatically, on the level of specific historical representations. For example, Castro’s references to work, desire and collecting contribute to his text’s unravelling of some foundational tropes of Australian national identity — especially the notion of the land as Edenic garden/wilderness; and the importance of labour in legitimising
colonial occupation — themes and tropes which recur in the other novels discussed in this thesis, especially McGahan’s and Watkinson’s texts.

This requires yet another detour, this time through the notions of language and desire in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. In Castro’s novel, references to collecting and nature often evoke metaphorical connections with the Biblical Garden of Eden, and invoke knowledge and desire. The latter (desire) not only characterizes the collecting impulse but is also, as Jacques Lacan argued, closely linked to language. According to the Biblical story of Genesis, the illicit acquisition of knowledge leads to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden: they become outsiders. In literature this foundational “expulsion” or loss has also often been utilized, especially in the context of psychoanalytic criticism, as an analogy for the subject’s entry into the “Symbolic”, or the realm mediated by signs, and the ensuing, inevitable loss of immediate contact with the “real”, when “[d]esire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need” (Lacan 311). It is perhaps desire in this sense that emerges as a force behind Kafka’s hungry “ghosts”, as they haunt communication and jeopardise the transmission of heritage.

To some extent, or in some contexts, collecting may exemplify this condition. Susan Stewart, for instance, notes that the idea of just “finding” a collectible camouflages a more profound form of desire: “In its erasure of labour, the collection is prelapsarian. One ‘finds’ the elements of the collection much as the prelapsarian Adam and Eve could find the satisfaction of their needs without a necessary articulation of desire” (Stewart 162). Her argument is that collecting suppresses the conditions of production (both material and discursive) of that object, and hence suppresses the structure of loss and desire (arising in the perceived “gap” between sign and referent) through which objects attain meaning in any signifying system. In the complex and hybrid logic of colonial and nationalist rhetoric, though, such “prelapsarian” imagery is also used to signify a form of mastery in which the fetishization of
the collectable (in the form of “heritage”) actually requires a privileging of labour.

The garden is the chief site of collecting in Castro’s novel, and his portrayal of the Dandenongs is among the many (albeit often indirect or oblique) ways that Castro utilizes this motif. Garden motifs and metaphors have an especially strong association with the Dandenongs region, and usually refer to its history as a horticultural district or productive “garden” for the nearby city, and a pleasure-garden for tourism. Castro’s protagonist Shih provides an ironic echo of this rhetoric of a garden paradise when he refers to his plans to recreate an “Edenic garden” in the hybrid urban bushland of his Dandenongs neighbourhood (315). Castro portrays the region as, variously, a fruitful garden, “studded with orchards and nurseries” (Castro 1); a semi-urban wasteland, and a lost wilderness (Castro 1) which for some of Castro’s characters, is also to some extent a wilderness of loss.

Images of wilderness and garden have important symbolic meanings and uses in the broader history of place making, particularly with respect to legitimizing colonial occupation. These images, along with terms such as “primeval”, “Eden” and “prehistoric”, reflect a common trope in Australian, and more generally, colonial, place-writing. The nineteenth-century American historian George Bancroft provides a typical example when he describes the “progress” of civilisation as a transformation of wilderness into garden. He correlates cultivation with culture and identifies the city as the garden’s controlling centre. Some remarkably similar echoes of Bancroft’s imagery appear in Castro’s text, where, however, they acquire new connotations. To Bancroft and many other writers and historians, wilderness was a place of “melancholy grandeur”, wasted or hidden potential, where “Trees might everywhere be seen breaking from their root in the marshy soil, and threatening to fall with the first rude gust” (Bancroft qtd in Lowenthal, “Landscapes” 139-140). It is an image reminiscent of the landscape crossed by Shih on his collecting
expeditions in the Dandenongs: “A gale blows...At times the ground shudders when a giant eucalypt falls and then the air is thick with the smell of leaf and loam. They fall without warning; roots in soft, volcanic soil” (Castro 1).

In Bancroft’s writing, “cities” and “libraries” seem to have agency; they are active forces of collecting, as the wilderness and hills “yield” to the cities the “produce of every clime” and “libraries gather the works...of every language and age” (Lowenthal, “Landscapes” 140). His image conveys a sense of confidence in the centrality of the city and the library, and in achieving the sort of comprehensiveness or totality that is often regarded as the collector’s ultimate goal. Castro’s text, in contrast, offers a different perspective: collecting may be a “daft undertaking”, and although Shih does return to the city and his “office in the Rare Books department of the university library” (Castro 7) with the results of his collecting expedition, it is only to follow another “detour” from his official mission).

The discourse of Australian colonial experience differed from that of Bancroft’s America (and perhaps involved comparisons with hell as often as with paradise). However, as the critic Kathryn Burns notes, that the “mythology of Eden” (8) was also often employed in Australian colonial writing (albeit with a convenient omission, perhaps, of the second part of the Genesis story; the expulsion from Eden), to promote Australia’s potential as a new beginning in a new world for European settlers. This idea derived rhetorical support from references to the Biblical story of Genesis: “the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed...And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (“Genesis” 2).

For colonists, an emphasis on the “wilderness” conveniently elided or downplayed the importance of an Aboriginal presence, and drew attention away from the localised difference or character of specific places, by aligning
the landscape with time and space on a cosmic scale. Represented like this, the colonisation of Australia could more readily be placed in the context of a wider narrative of human progress and evolution in which British imperialism was considered to play important role.

Another consequence of this sense of Australia’s primeval quality, though, was that it emphasized that the British in Australia could not turn to their new homeland’s past for a sense of legitimacy and authority derived from a place-based cultural heritage. However, the original paradise or Edenic garden was also, in a sense, a wilderness, insofar as it was an origin, a natal and natural place, awaiting the (gendered) labour of man, and in this new Eden, labour was the factor that seems to resolve the problem of the colonial newcomers and other outsiders. Griffiths contends that the representation of place in Australian history (including concept such as the frontier, and racially-based nationalism) has long been informed by a temporal framework influenced by “social Darwinism”, using rhetoric that invokes religious imagery while conflating Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory with the fundamentally different, even contradictory “idea of progress” (Griffiths 10-11).

The Australian historian Henry Reynolds (Why Weren’t We Told 93), for instance, quotes a particularly cruel piece of self-serving logic in a 1906 text, which attempts to justify the so-called “passing” of Aboriginal people by arguing that the cause of their “extinction” actually honoured them, by improving their land: “The white townships growing where all was dark with forest; the “axes ringing through the backwood” are praised as evidence of such improvement: the colonists “press forward” (Lee, The Coming of the British, qtd in Reynolds 93). Labour connected a settler landscape of frontiers, clearings and openings in dark forest with the symbolic “blood and soil” heritage of race and (national) place.
In *The Garden Book*, these ideas influence Darcy Damon, a self-educated and socially marginalized labourer who grapples with the possibilities of work as a means of satisfying desire, especially such the desire for identity (whether on the level of the individual subject or the nation). Despite some initial ambivalence, Darcy Damon eventually equates work with the establishment of clear boundaries, the security of belonging: “In order to achieve clarity, he believed he had to return to hardship” (Castro 121). To Darcy Damon and his White Guard associates, physical labour — signified by the bloodstained axe (Castro 39), and the fenced clearing in the forest — earns the right to belong; to be Australian: (“Up at Gimpel’s...[t]hey sat on wooden boxes stamped with the words ‘White Labour’ ”(Castro 23).

However, as Castro shows, the distinctions on which the association between labour and colonial legitimacy rely are far from self-evident or consistent. For instance not only is the reward for labour unevenly distributed, but other evidence of labour (Chinese labour for instance) presents a threat and must be suppressed or constructed as abnormal (“You don’t supply wood they’ll get them Chinamen in; work for nothin’, maybe a dry biscuit [sic]” Castro 23). Much of the work which allows Darcy to regain his place in the community (“he had land acquired through opprobrious means” (Castro 48)) is itself of dubious repute. Although Castro does not mention it directly, Darcy’s stories also offer a reminder of the role of the outlaw/bushranger in “settler” identity myths. He is employed by a notorious gangster, and

...began to spin outlaw tales with silkworm patience...Some gave him a sly respect, if only because being on the wrong side of the law was similar to the fate of those returning from the Big War as damaged men; violent men. (Castro 48)

Castro also indicates that the apparently prelapsarian passivity of collecting and the energy of labour both entail the same quest for ownership or mastery, and both may be as doomed to failure (crashing) as are the humans who try to
outwit the hungry ghosts, in the Kafka epigraph. The value of work seems questionable. Darcy’s own heritage is labour; he is born to it and of it: “My mother had a hard labour. Labourer was what I was” (Castro 12), but work, insofar as it involves a ceaseless and futile striving for an elusive reward, represents a sort of doom; ultimately, only continued failure or death seems possible.

Darcy’s mother, for example, worn out by illness, poverty and hard work, loses her appetite (desire) and dies; a victim perhaps of the hungry ghosts: “Her speech came from the exhaustion of the universe” (Castro 25). Collecting, propelled by the same force of desire, may be similarly toxic: in The Garden Book it is linked to addiction, especially in the sections of narrative attributed to Darcy Damon, where Castro interlaces the impulses and implications of Darcy’s book collecting with references to the cravings of drug addiction. However, Castro also reveals glimpses of other possibilities, as he draws connections between these two destructive yet sometimes fruitful forces, which shape Darcy’s attempt to return to his home district and rebuild his life.

Illicit Things and the Goodness of Work

Both Darcy’s preoccupations, collecting and drug-taking, are in different ways a response, and even a solution to, the hardship and deprivation of his childhood and his later life as a rural labourer and timber-cutter: “If you cut a tree, always plant a tree…it seemed my whole life would be...bare...imagination planted but not watered” (Castro 22). Darcy escapes his early life by going to sea, and on voyages to China, he discovers opium, among other things. The collecting of books, and of their contents, is also portrayed as part of his experience of addiction (“At sea, my book chest was continuously employed. Not only as a coffer of exotic manuals, but to conceal the ever-attendant maiden in her wooden vial.” (Castro 30)). His later ventures into book selling sustain this connection, in the form of the propagation of desire:
“Even before his shipping days he had built up a collection of cheap books. He never sold a single book he had not read...he made the book delicious to hold; made it an object of knowledge” (34).

Nevertheless, Darcy eventually finds himself torn between opposite poles of lethargic (and foreign) addiction and an active (and socially acceptable) drug-free life, alternately craving work and passivity.

He wanted the goodness of work, moving noisily forward. He would have others hear it. But he was swinging between that and the creeping knowledge which only seemed to arrive with passivity, God’s knowledge, illicit information, like the yellow wattle flowers which suddenly appeared, silently, in their millions. (Castro 49).

From one viewpoint, the lack of intentionality and agency, the passive quality of the natural world, which in colonial mythology placed it as subordinate to human endeavour, also has a more disturbing connotation of lack of control. The passivity of addiction (too much desire; desire out of control) and the passivity of nature seem superficially similar insofar as they are illicit, insidious and even threatening — much as the Biblical acquisition of “God’s knowledge” or the Lacanian entry into the Symbolic have tragic or troubling consequences insofar as they involve insatiable desire for something structurally forbidden. Yet when Darcy comments cryptically that “the idea of goodness filled him with such distrust”, it appears that he actually distrusts the goodness of work, rather than passivity.

Such distrust may seem justified by the way that, later in the novel, Darcy’s return to a simplistic belief in supposed goodness of “work, moving noisily forward” is associated with the novel’s central tragedies. Darcy’s early attraction to Swan, for instance, eventually mutates into contempt, an attitude that arises from a common but complex meshing of discourses and obscure logic in which foreignness, femininity, and nature converge: the reticence of
Swan’s work, her poetry, is regarded as laziness, potentially threatening in its apparent passivity and unproductiveness.

Before bigotry gradually takes hold of him, though, Darcy acknowledges the productive and powerful quality of nature’s “passivity”, speculating about its implications: “Should not work also be exhilaration, a balance struck between necessity and gaming, darting like the Golden Whistler or the whipbird before rain?” (Castro 49). The idea of resolution inherent in the notion of “balance” or compromise is perhaps not sustained by the deconstructive tendencies of Castro’s text. However, Darcy’s book-collecting provides one of several examples, in Castro’s text, of alternative, and perhaps more fruitful and positive, ways of engaging with the forces of desire and displacement that animate work, whether it is the acquisitive or transient work of writing or reading, the creative work of cultivation or the receptive work of collection.

Darcy’s collecting, for instance, initially involves the desire for knowledge; the same desire that renders Adam and Eve outcasts. For Darcy, though, as a way of “articulating” the desire, reading is a form of “distancing” that actually proves valuable in managing his addiction: “Small quantities of opium as medicine; large amounts of books to moderate the craving with knowledge” (Castro 36). Reflecting on his opium addiction, Darcy also reveals an ambivalent attitude, as he acknowledges that his life as an addict is passive and inadequate (“It was not a self that allowed him to breathe” Castro 49), yet also full of contradictions and ambiguity.

Darcy’s use of opium is ambiguous in many ways. Although destructive, it is aligned with a sense of distance and foreignness, and with the acquisition of many other, and more enriching, foreign things — books, materials and accessories for his house — and with acts and experiences that form a briefly enlightening detour on his “cumulative and linear” path towards “radical patriotism” and bigotry (Castro 116). His experience of foreignness, both
chemical and cultural, provides a detour that initially enhances his life as, breaking from local customs and attitudes, he develops friendships with his Chinese-Australian neighbours, Swan and her father, Baba. Moreover, the displacing effect of drugs resembles reading (‘I took the book and [his pet] koala... and set both free... For the first time, I went out of time’ Castro 21), and has advantages (a form of trance-like enchantment, perhaps).

Despite Darcy’s eventual recourse to hard-line conservatism, his early experiences with collecting (the embodiment of desire) and addiction (desire out of control) provoke initial misgivings about the opposition between work and passivity which is enlisted to bolster the colonists’ legitimacy, and also lead him to question his understanding of the relationship between desire and reward which underpins it.

These events also offer some examples of the possible advantages of desire’s endless deferral and distancing, and evoke the fruitfulness of the displacing movement that characterizes signification. However, as I have noted, Castro’s text persistently takes other detours, avoiding clear allegiance to Lacanian or any other theory. For example, in Darcy’s description of his opium use, rather than a sense of distance, which would be reminiscent of the movement of desire that impels narrative, the effect of the drug more closely resembles Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, with its: “Even today, China speaks to me in its own dialect of clarity. The mist, the cliffs, the river-gorges produce neither distance nor perspective, but form a crystalline experience”.

This type of short-circuit between places and times, crossing unpredictably between paradigms, is very Benjaminian — yet Darcy then immediately reiterates a reference to desire and distance, musing that nonetheless “It has become my Chinese pleasure. Incurable yearning” (Castro 29). Similar short-circuits and crossings affect Castro’s garden-related metaphors. The garden’s proximity to or distance from the wilderness which defines it is difficult to
determine; its place is uncannily and inextricably entangled with his imagery of wilderness; and, subsequently, with Castro’s deployment of collecting as a narrative strategy and motif.

2.6 Wildness: Collecting and Writing

In concurrence with Benjamin’s own views about heritage as catalytic rather than conservative, and also with post-structuralist ideas about citation and iterability, Castro’s allusions to Benjamin’s collecting theories and other texts and theories do not allow a conclusive reading of his novel. Instead, in combination with the wilderness and garden-related motifs in the novel, invite a rich array of possible interpretations. Such disorienting experiences (for the reader as much as the characters) are typical of Castro’s writing, where placelessness can be valuable: “I want to be someone else, somewhere else, in order to see myself” (Castro “Heterotopias” 179).

This is often apparent in The Garden Book; for instance, Darcy’s addiction to opium is associated with his experience of China, and the drug has at least one useful, if temporary, consequence: “Such foreign things allowed me to make a foreigner of myself, and thus I became myself” (Castro 53). Norman Shih, the librarian and curator, likewise, is an outsider, but uses this status as a form of provisional and equivocal empowerment: “in Rare Books I was an apatride, a stateless person...I was proud of my record of not rescuing ghosts for any national cause” (Castro 289).

Similarly, while some texts may be implicated in attempts to stake spatial claims, Castro depicts Swan’s own writing as minimally attached to self or place, despite its personal nature and her use of local and natural materials like bark and pollen. Swan, like Darcy, is prone to addiction, not only to the drugs and alcohol on which she eventually becomes dependent, but also — albeit in a very different way — to writing: “Her poetry was always a kind of addiction for her because it possessed a latency; with its silences, its potential
for growth. Critics had all missed the obvious thing: it was vegetative, incorrigible. Written on leaves with pollen inks” (Castro 257).

Here, though, the movement of language only resembles a kind of addiction insofar as it is uncontrolled and self-propelled — in this case, the silences, the absences, are valued rather than dreaded by Swan. This differs from a drug addict’s self-destructive lack. Swan’s work, ephemeral and anonymous, is described as “[a] planting, with scarcely a mark of ownership. A respect and a passing” (Castro 257). Passing by, it is nomadic, without a place of its own, or a destination.

Swan’s own place in Castro’s text also remains to some extent uncertain. In passages that alternate between first-person narrative from the viewpoint of Norman Shih and various other characters, and an omniscient third-person narrative voice (presumably but not definitively Shih’s, as he reconstructs Swan’s life from a meagre collection of clues), information (its own heritage or provenance often unclear) continually coalesces and disintegrates, amid numerous puns and allusions to other texts. The “real” Swan remains elusive.

As Castro reveals, though, the apparent placelessness of Swan’s writing, and of Swan herself is not necessarily always subversive or even beneficial: it can also be potentially detrimental: “Alcohol...helped her escape the void which was herself” (Castro 305). The actual possibility of pure placelessness is questionable too. Swan is still marked out, paradoxically, by others’ usurpation of her place (such as her lover Jasper’s editing and publication of her poems): “words ran riot inside her, requiring her to place them in a form so they belonged to others...when remade, she lived only on the outside, concealing an emptiness within...She was without qualities” (Castro 305).

The critic Wenche Ommundsen has suggested that “Castro’s fictional characters escape the very category of fictional character” and that Castro’s response to the issue of foreignness and identity is to reject “categorization
according to cultural and individual identities ... Castro presents experience as existing beyond the boundaries of the individual self... The difference between ‘inside’ and outside’ collapses” (Ommundsen 164). The ambiguity of boundaries inherent in Castro’s portrayal of Swan extends to his challenge to the power of the text as a bounded place. Following one of Castro’s possible detours, his allusion to Swan’s poetry as “a respect and a passing” (Castro 257), for instance, provides yet another context for his garden book: Michel de Certeau’s comments about the relationship between text and reader and his concept of the “wild”. As I mentioned earlier, de Certeau’s model of reading echoes Benjamin’s rejection of the concept of cultural treasures.

De Certeau suggests that reading is a locus of subversive power, a potentially deconstructive type of disturbance or “wildness” brought to a text — yet functioning within the text’s “own” terms. He comments that “the name “wild” both creates and defines what the scriptural economy situates outside of itself... the wild is transitory; it marks itself (by smudges, lapses, etc.) but it does not write itself. It alters a place (it disturbs), but it does not establish a place” (155), and suggests that reading is “the mark of something past and passing... the ‘practically nothing’ of a passing-by... What marks itself and passes on has no text of its own” (de Certeau 155).

Although sometimes de Certeau seems to privilege reading, at other times his distinction between reading and writing seems to waver. He argues that the reader, poaching in the text, is also “possessed” by “his own fooling and jesting that introduces plurality and difference into the written system of a society and a text” (de Certeau 174). With this carnivalesque jesting and ventriloquism, the reader is “a novelist... He deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him” (de Certeau 174). De Certeau suggests that reading “has no place... [the reader’s] place is not here or there, one or the other, but neither the one nor the other, simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving both by mixing them together”.
In contrast, Castro’s representation of the inside/outside relationship does not (as Ommundsen suggests) necessarily entail a dissolution or collapse of borders or boundaries.

Paul Carter, in *The Road to Botany Bay*, emphasizes the structurally important role of boundaries for communication, history and the establishment of place. He notes that the “house and garden are where [the settler] can tell stories about travelling”, and that “[i]nside the fence, it is the wildness beyond that becomes the place of writing, the site of reverie” (P. Carter 155). However, these boundaries do not function simply as divisions, even though they constitute or structure the wildness that enables the telling of stories about settling; as well as the “garden” which enables a sense of movement. The arrangement is not simply reciprocal: the wildness beyond is already inside the fence.

Likewise, “place” retains a place in Castro’s text, with important implications for his novel’s themes and concerns with historical injustice. As a “garden” book, Castro’s novel emphasizes not only the “wild” element of “reading” that is already in the text (and is perhaps invoked or exposed by collecting), but also the “placing”, the writing, of reading. In his text, the relationship between writing and reading does not seem to involve either reciprocity or dissolution — like the garden which never really needs tending (Castro 316), with its (dis)placing of the wilderness beyond.

*Hopeful Work*

Consequently, although collecting — as it emerges in Castro’s novel in association with his garden/wilderness and nature imagery — involves a Benjaminian radical overturning of notions of containment and possession, place, stable identities and linear heritage, it also involves an unsettling of binary oppositions which has implications for Benjamin’s conception of collecting as a distinct alternative to historical narrative. In Benjamin’s work,
part of collecting’s importance lies in its embodiment of an allusiveness and
ghostly temporality that undermines the goals of narrative, namely the
synthesising and accumulating of meaning; the establishing of a place. In many
ways, this is reflected in *The Garden Book*, as Castro’s metaphor of vegetative
growth indicates:

> These trees withhold their secrets. Their form is not
symmetrical. They branch out, root out, without
correction...saplings disseminate...They are nothing but
arbitrary and opportunistic addenda. Written, they cannot be
erased. Only the shoots of this new knowledge, falling into
fragmentary decay...empty signs of mass destruction...only
this...can counter the totality of words, which only exist for
making meaning, searching for rationality and coherence.
(Castro 274)

Such a reading might seem to counter-intuitively correlate collecting with its
opposite, dissemination, but it was for an assurance of the *potential* for such
outward movement and transience that Benjamin valued the ostensibly
accumulative, conservative activity of collecting. Castro’s own use of collecting
— his citations and allusions — functions accordingly, to “counter the totality
of words”, suggesting a vast proliferation of possible directions for
interpretation (many that seem challengingly but perhaps fruitfully,
incompatible). However, it also provides more conventional clues to aid the
reader’s perhaps inevitable search for “rationality and coherence” (Castro
274), and in this and other ways, Castro’s text points to some possible
difficulties with utilising Benjamin’s ideas.

For example, by marking his text’s own literary and theoretical heritage,
Castro’s citations risk being too direct a route to meaning and coherence,
reasserting the “frontier” between the text and its readers that can be crossed
only if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters” (de Certeau
171). The image in *The Garden Book* of a postcard, never received by Swan,
“which arrived four years after it was sent, redirected from post office to post office, having taken a long detour” (Castro 307) — an image using the photograph as both a “reproduction” and a supplement to the text — echoes Derrida’s well-known work *The Post Card*, which treats the divisibility of the letter and the “intrinsic indeterminacy” of communication (Kamuf, “Introduction to Part Five” 460). So evidently an “illustration” (in every sense) of an aspect of Derrida’s work, the image resembles the narrator’s reference to his own textuality (“I will have to point myself out to you...In days gone by such an obvious indication of intent and purpose would have been the ultimate in bad taste” (Castro 253).

As well, the complex combination of narrative and citation in Castro’s prose perhaps responds to some other problems that emerge from Benjamin’s opposition of the two forms of representation. For instance, in his discussion of narrative theory, Martin McQuillan suggests that (from the point of view of “the concepts of context and iteration”) it is not possible for a narrative to be:

...generically separate from other forms of verbal or written discourse...When the boundaries of structuralist, formalist or hermeneutic definition have been removed...what remains is a narrativised and narrativising context. (McQuillan 11)

He proposes, therefore, that a narrative could be defined as “any minimal linguistic act” or mark (McQuillan 10). Like any text, too, it also partakes of the allusive, metaphorical structure of language itself, so in this respect it could perhaps be argued that the incorporation of citations and quotations in (or as) a text, although an act of collecting, is not necessarily a qualitatively different form of representation.

Although Benjamin attributed collecting’s allegedly unique value to its concrete, physical qualities, this may not be enough to ultimately sustain a distinction. Narratologist Mieke Bal, for instance, has argued that the collecting of objects may be analysed using narrative terms and concepts (97).
The notion that any signifying act or mark can, under the right circumstances, constitute “narrative” (“any unit of meaning made knowable by the textually inscribed context of inter-subjectivity and the signifying chain” (McQuillan 11)), may even include the fleeting historical image triggered by Benjamin’s historical materialist collecting. However, I will argue that Castro’s text suggests — and the other novels in this thesis support — the view that collecting does not necessarily collapse into language or textuality, but survives in a ghostly manner. It is a reminder or instance of disruptive materiality, exercising its entrance-ing power in texts by emerging as a haunting other, a space/entrance in which and through which a reading can move.

Thus, in *The Garden Book*, Castro’s use of collecting emphasizes the hauntedness of language and the associated heritage of foreignness, and unsettles notions of place as structured by a “simple counterposition”, and of history as a linear progression. However, in his text, story or narrative also survives the myriad of detours through the extra-textual allusions that link collecting (especially of books) to the motif of the garden. Castro describes Swan’s writing (anonymous, tentative and vulnerable interventions placed in other texts and genres, in thrillers and detective fiction (Castro 141)) as “hopeful work” (111). Her “leaf-poems” (both seeds and supplements (Castro 257) are the place, or beginning, of something (reading) to which they are nevertheless surplus or out of place) reach out hopefully, looking towards that which is not present, resembling desire.

To Shih, Swan’s work also resembles the forest with its “wild growth falling, which reminds [him] of love...love which attacks coherence...renders us human and vulnerable to oblivion” Castro 274). Investing in latency, potential, not in acquisition and essence, Swan, writes privately and self-effacingly on ephemeral materials: she “practised her calligraphy on plane-tree leaves” (Castro 115) — in this tangential way surviving to be known by her son, and
pieced together through the text, as a collection of speculative conjectures, which enable a regeneration of story.

Swan’s writing is hopeful work not because it seeks some positive resolution, but because it involves playing with lack rather than pursuing desire, and because in it, dissemination is accepted as a condition of accumulation. Castro’s text may be hopeful work insofar as it also endorses narrative (broadly speaking, as text) as a way of establishing a place (a reason, a starting point) for ethical/historical action. Such action is only possible in terms of a (playful, provisional) interaction with, or deployment of, that which must be excluded in order to establish and isolate the concept of narrative. Rather than a stable concept, collecting, as deployed in *The Garden Book* — and the other novels I discuss below — could be regarded as a strategy for hopeful work through which the plight, and the power, of “outsiders” — emerges with vivid and moving intensity.

The critic Richard Terdiman claims that “All texts register something outside their limits...are driven or haunted by what exceeds them” (Terdiman 158); and Benjaminian collecting, perhaps, haunts *The Garden Book*, as an important part of a strategy that offers a tentative, provisional way of making claims to place (establishing a place of or for the text, and concurrently enabling a place for historical repossession and ethical action) while acknowledging the text’s ghostliness and permeability. Just as the garden is not contained by its boundaries, so both the narrative and the collection exceed themselves, creating a sense of hauntedness, which is at once a result of genuine loss, a condition of discovery, and a reminder of obligation.

One of the main insights offered by this reading of Castro’s novel is that, in his text, collecting functions as a provisional strategy rather than a stable concept, but, as such, also provides an effective (and entrancing) way of opening up or unsettling the concepts of geographical and textual place; evoking a haunted
temporality; and drawing attention to the plight — and also the potential — of the “outsider” in a society where personal, racial and national identity are intimately related. Bernadette Brennan has commented that “[r]eaders are invited to enter into Castro’s texts in different ways in the expectation that such entries will stimulate other connections, other ways of reading.” (Castro’s Fiction 16-17). In the next five chapters, I will also explore a range of collecting-related connections and ways of reading or entering other novels which do not necessarily replicate Castro’s or Benjamin’s approaches, but in which motifs of collecting also function in entrance-ing ways.
3. LINES, TREES AND CIRCLES: Heritage, Collecting, Stories and Silences in Jillian Watkinson’s *The Hanging Tree*

Set in outback Queensland, Jillian Watkinson’s 2004 novel, *The Hanging Tree* examines connections between land and identity in both indigenous and “settler” cultures, and in a post-colonial move, inverts traditional colonial hierarchies of centre and periphery and offers a fairly positive, sometimes even nonchalant, perspective on the ghostly happenings and apparitions associated with the characters’ experiences of heritage and country. However, Watkinson’s portrayal of the semi-fictional Masters family history also emphasizes the effects of the repressed traumas of Australia’s past, and the importance of “history-keeping” and “story” as ways of responding to the ghosts of this past: “Once seeing through ghosts becomes a habit, you tend to stop noticing them altogether” (Watkinson 2).

Like the other two novels discussed in this part of the thesis, *The Hanging Tree* focuses on stories of researching and collecting family history, and considers the notion of heritage (cultural, genetic and economic) and its significance in the context of the broader problems of identity and power in post-colonial society. Themes and motifs of hauntedness, collecting and narrative are central to Watkinson’s portrayal of the semi-fictional Masters family history, in which she emphasizes the effects of the repressed traumas of Australia’s past, and the importance of collecting, “history-keeping” and “story” as ways of responding to the ghosts of this past. Unlike Castro’s and McGahan’s novels, however, Watkinson’s narrative attempts to incorporate an indigenous perspective, inverting traditional colonial hierarchies of centre and periphery and presenting uncanny experiences as a sign of belonging rather than alienation.
In this chapter, I refer to some of Walter Benjamin’s early work to argue that although the subversive possibilities of collecting in Watkinson’s novel are less developed than in Castro’s text, the uncanny attributes of the collecting motif form an important part of her strategy of problematizing the metaphors of heritage, such as lines and circles, through which “settler” society frames its claims to place and history. I discuss her affirmation of storytelling in the context of Benjamin’s argument for the story’s important epistemological, social and historical implications (characteristics he also attributed, more radically, to collecting). I suggest that Benjamin’s notion of historical collecting’s value as a site of epistemological gaps and discontinuities is useful for understanding how the collecting motif plays a distinctive, if not privileged, role in Watkinson’s explorations of silence and power in Australian history, and I also draw attention to aspects of her text which reveal some of the potential challenges that may be involved in applying Benjamin’s ideas about collecting, story, narrative and history to a text produced in a very different cultural and historical context.

3.1 Storylines and Lines of Silence

The plot of *The Hanging Tree* focuses on the domestic dramas that revolve around a western Queensland grazing property, *Tallaringa Downs*, the core of the Masters’ family’s pastoral holdings, and the “Centre of the World” (Watkinson 20). As Bill Masters gathers material for his own version of the Masters family history (“droughts, floods, and big musters, Flying Doctor visits, and all the births, deaths and accidents” (Watkinson 2), this collecting of family heritage reveals how the turbulent (and extraordinarily convoluted) relationships of her characters are also related to conflicts and events on broader geographical and historical scales.

These events and circumstances include “frontier” violence; the declining phase of British imperialism; both world wars and the Vietnam War; and even
developments in medical and communication technology, which (in contrast to the bleak effects of modernity alluded to in Castro’s Kafka epigraph to The Garden Book) are shown to have a liberating effect. Overall, the Masters’ family heritage is portrayed as a complex mixture of trauma, empowerment, and repression, as conflicted and enriching as their equally diverse background: “in our family, the heritage is mixed and blurred. It’s hard to pin down just who we are by definition. We are — in alphabetical order — Aborigine, Afghani, Chinese, English, wild Irish and Welsh” (Watkinson 28).

For Watkinson’s narrator, Bill, collecting and storytelling are both ways of countering the effects of the self-censorship (including “the Post-war Silence” Watkinson 166) and suffering experienced by his relatives. They also provide a way of asserting his own identity within the family hierarchy, where knowledge of family history (a complex heritage informed by several cultures) is regarded as a privilege, a necessity and a burden bestowed on only a few members of the family. Watkinson makes it clear that for Bill Masters, heritage, particularly the handing down of stories and artefacts, remains a serious responsibility, as is the tracing of his lineage.

Bill Masters introduces his version of the (fictional) Masters’ family history with an assertion of identity that links narrative, collecting and place:

My name is Bill Masters and I come from a long line of storytellers…Once upon a time we used to gather around campfires to tell our stories…Now, when we come together as a family…we rarely tell the old stories, not in the way they were meant to be told, out in the open, under the stars…Since I can remember, I have been collecting stories. (Watkinson, 1).

For Bill, collecting family heritage is a way of honouring the ghosts, and of understanding his place in his family and his family’s place in the wider world, and although Watkinson tends to suggest that collecting’s main value is as a starting point for “story”, in this chapter, I will argue that collecting
nevertheless has an important and distinctive role. This is more evident when considered from the perspective of Benjamin’s work on collecting and storytelling, as well as the quite different context of Australia’s indigenous cultures.

Watkinson’s troubled characters, many of whom are, in one way or another, rendered “voiceless” or silent — through, for example, war, social and political discrimination and subsequent family dysfunction, provide constant reminders of the importance of Bill’s project. As one of her characters comments, “After World War One, three hundred thousand Australian men didn’t talk to their families...That’s when oral history dies in this country. When stories aren’t told, a nation forgets” (Watkinson 166). Similarly, Bill’s part-Aboriginal uncles are the last generation to undergo initiation and “wear the parallel cicatrices of learning...Ben, Wilson and Greg were the last members of the family to take that path. It’s all gone now” (311).

Watkinson implies that an aspect of the “silence” is the suppression of a counter-narrative of Australian history and place, one that would acknowledge the agency, as well as the oppression, of marginalized groups. In response, her novel celebrates diversity and unravels gendered and Anglocentric myths of Australian history and identity by revealing internal intricacies and intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression. This approach can also be perilously reductive: it could be argued that by linking and equating a wide range of different issues, injustices, victims and oppressors, there is a risk of diminishing the impact of any blame or responsibility. However, Watkinson’s use of the collecting motif, in connection with her references to multiple forms of historical representation, helps to mitigate this effect.

Watkinson uses a range of strategies to explore and respond to the problems of history and heritage in an Australian context. For instance, she utilizes some conventional heritage metaphors such as lines and circles and, without
radically reinterpreting them, deploys them against the current of mainstream historical narratives, reversing some traditional hierarchies. More significantly, though, she also acknowledges the complex and multi-faceted imbrication of language, silence, and power in the context of indigenous and “settler” cultures by sustaining a tension between three forms of historical representation: history-keeping, storytelling, and collecting. Through these three approaches, she calls into question the adequacy of linear and binary models for defining place and for historical, family and social relationships.

3.2 Containment Lines: Keeping Hold of Heritage and Place

In *The Hanging Tree*, Watkinson portrays a metaphorical and physical landscape that is shaped by overlapping lines (lines of descent, property lines, narrative lines) and by circles of story and horizon and family. This landscape is also overshadowed by another pattern, that of trees, both real and figurative: the notorious Hanging Tree, the protective “Guardian Gums” around the main homestead, and the intricacies and enigmas of the Masters family tree. In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the roles, and relationship, of collecting and storytelling in Watkinson’s text, and their contribution to these ghostly crossings and displacements.

To a certain extent, Watkinson depicts the (aptly named) Masters family history as a kind of (albeit limited) reverse colonisation. This presents a challenge to the way that even critical accounts of Australia’s racist colonial past may unintentionally perpetuate oppression by emphasising victimhood and underplaying the dependence of colonial power on indigenous agency. Lines of heritage sustain the pastoral aggregation or “empire”, *Tallaringa*, founded by “The Grandfather”, a Welsh migrant, war veteran and founder of the Masters clan, as “the one way he could see to keep his...children safe...Children would be shielded from bigotry...from policemen...who’d hung his son in a tree for the crows” (Watkinson 135). From this secure centre,
descendants of The Grandfather are enabled to extend their influence to other states and as far as Canberra, taking up positions of power in many fields: politics, law, medicine, science, and anthropology.

However, Watkinson’s text also exposes the limitations of this approach, noting the continued vulnerability of some Masters family members, and revealing problems that arise as the family replicates within itself the autocratic and repressive structures and divisions of colonialism and the social distinctions of capitalism. In response to various atrocities and injustices (from the violence of war to the torture of his part-Aboriginal son by police), The Grandfather in turn became “a despot”. Moreover, although Bill’s father claims that discrimination disappears after “The old man smoothed the way with a whopping great cheque”, Bill is sceptical: “Uncle Greg has told me differently. Greg is not blue-eyed or fair-haired and unlike Ben who is as dark, he didn’t have much appetite for book learning”.

Despite Bill’s father’s claim that “[t]he petty prejudices of the Queensland bourgeoisie...could not touch them”, because “they knew they were descended from heroes and gods”, Watkinson makes it clear that there is another side to the story. For some members of the Masters family, (described as “in alphabetical order — Aborigine, Afghani, Chinese, English, wild Irish and Welsh”), Australia is a place where any attempt to make a life away from “the protection of The Grandfather’s name and wallet” entails exposure to racism. They encounter “peers and teachers who were still steeped in colonialism” (Watkinson 171), and endure being called “scum and boong for the first time” (Watkinson 213).

As Watkinson’s narrator continues to collect and assemble clues about his family heritage, he discovers other signs that the lines of history and heritage may be destructive and constraining; not only marking place, but duplicating, on many scales, a tradition of keeping people in their place. For instance,
Wilson Masters, The Grandfather’s heir and Bill’s putative uncle, finds that “unrelenting responsibility takes a toll” (129). In turn, Wilson’s lover, Jan, rejects the family heirloom he offers her: to Jan, the “antique gold fob-watch chain” is a disturbing symbol of “ownership and class” (312) from an isolated world where women lacked “safety in which to express themselves” (Watkinson 314).

For the family historian, too, the collecting of heritage may entail a form of submission. According to Susan Stewart’s analysis of collecting, “[t]he collection says that the world is given; we are inheritors, not producers of value here” (Stewart 164). One effect of this passive model of collecting is that, in the context of Stewart’s comments, to inherit something is also to be produced or placed by it to some extent, to be already established as an heir — and, conversely, to submit to the possibility of disinheritance and exclusion.

Moreover, while Watkinson tends to portray the “bush” as a place of healing, and as a home, rather than a forbidding wilderness, this home is marked by the presence of the notorious “Hanging Tree”, where The Grandfather’s son was tortured. The “Hanging Tree”, though, also has its metaphorical counterpart at home, in the Masters family tree, through which the legacy of The Grandfather is disseminated, genetically, economically, and psychologically. This legacy materializes in many forms.

Given the emphasis on family in The Hanging Tree, it is appropriate that in this novel, the equivalent of the “wilder, darker country” in McGahan’s The White Earth is in fact that place closest to home, and most ordered: the rose garden at the family headquarters, Tallaringa Downs. In Watkinson’s text, the garden serves as a focal point for some of the issues addressed by collecting, storytelling and history-keeping in The Hanging Tree. Like the handing down of heirlooms (which traditionally exemplifies a passive/receptive model of
collecting), the establishment of a rose garden in the desert represents another form of possession and exclusion.

For instance, the garden forms part of a spatial binary opposition at the core of the Masters empire, through which Watkinson exposes a world that is divided along lines of gender and class as well as race. The activities of the collector and the gardener have at times converged in a process of claiming place, establishing boundaries and order. Although such spatial claims are not necessarily always detrimental ("proliferating boundaries...serve the symbolic function of making a place that speaks, a place with a history" (P. Carter 155)), in *The Hanging Tree*, the rose garden is a focus for the tension that arises as the Masters clan both replicates and subverts the old patriarchal, imperial order. Maintained with difficulty in the desert climate, it forms a barrier against the surrounding farmland and bushland ("roses in the wilderness" Watkinson 17). Rather than a “place that speaks”, though, the rose garden itself is associated with repression and silence.

The ordering and classifying of place via the binary opposition of garden (or farm) and wilderness was a common strategy for imperial domination in the nineteenth century, and for the advancement of industrial and capitalist interests in general. In a colonial context, gardening in particular, as an imposition of order and a process of containment, was often a “sign of imperial power, a mark of possession and ownership” (Holmes, Martin & Mirmohamadi 8). In the rose garden, the “inversion” of centres and margins of power and geography (city and bush), achieved at great cost by The Grandfather and maintained by his grandson, Wilson, is reversed again in this opposition between garden and wilderness.

This opposition, it becomes apparent, is the work of the (nominal) family matriarch, Rachael Masters, wife of The Grandfather’s ineffectual son, “The Boss”, for whom it is some compensation for her own limited power in the
patriarchal, hierarchical structure of her society and family. The eventual removal of the rose garden — preceded by a symbolic cutting of the flowers in the absence of its owner, Rachael Masters — marks a step towards healing and change. However, a generation later, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Watkinson emphasizes that Bill Masters, his siblings, and cousins still experience both the benefits and the more disturbing effects of The Grandfather’s oppressive legacy. Accordingly, Watkinson’s text also manifests a suspicion of the “neat, sequential” narrative line of history. This suspicion contributes to the importance attributed to both story and collecting in The Hanging Tree.

3.3 Trees and Shifting Circles: Storytelling, History-Keeping and Collecting

When Bill Masters initially attempts “a neat sequential account of events, a standard sort of family history” (Watkinson 2), intended to be written as a gift for his daughter’s “eighteenth birthday” (Watkinson 2-3), he soon finds that this is more difficult than expected: “I’m discovering there’s no such thing as a beginning to a family story” (Watkinson 3). Watkinson emphasizes, however, that for Bill Masters, heritage and the tracing of his lineage remains a serious responsibility, and that the handing down of stories and the collecting of heritage artefacts is an intricately interrelated process, one that has much wider implications than the accumulation of data for “standard” history.

It is in this context that she makes some subtle distinctions within the overall concepts of heritage and history, distinguishing Bill’s work as a storyteller from that of the “history-keepers” in his family, and both history-keeping and storytelling from the “standard” history which Bill initially attempts:

Now, so there can be no repeat of the Silence in our family, we have two or three of us who keep the history. All of it. I’m not one of them — I’m just a storyteller who’s still learning. I don’t even know how history-keepers are selected and trained. (Watkinson 169)
Bill comments that he “wouldn’t want to be Clinton Masters. He is The Grandfather and Uncle; he is Ben and Wilson. He carries all their learning; he is a history-keeper” (Watkinson 235).

In his refusal to “break with the traditions of the storytellers” (Watkinson 2), Bill is perpetuating another family tradition. Nevertheless, he also utilizes storytelling not only as a way of countering the effects of the trauma and repression experienced by his relatives (including “the Post-war Silence” (Watkinson 166)), but also as a means of asserting his own identity within the family hierarchy. In the Masters clan, knowledge of family history (a complex heritage informed by several cultures) is regarded as a privilege, a necessity and a burden bestowed on only “two or three” members of the family (Watkinson 169).

The idea that storytelling has something unique to offer as a way of countering various “silences” or shortcomings in history has a complex history of its own. It has various links to collecting, which, although not as central to the novel as in Castro’s text, retains particular significance both as a historical strategy for her protagonists, and as a perspective from which to consider Watkinson’s approach to the specific problems of writing Australia’s past. Of particular relevance to this is the work of Walter Benjamin, especially his famous essay on storytelling. The more radical aspects of Benjamin’s thinking are most evident in his writings on, and use of, collecting, but this essay — rather than simply privileging speech over writing — foreshadows many aspects of his ideas about history, heritage and collecting. A similar connection and potential emerges in Watkinson’s own references to collecting and storytelling, and her stress on the importance of experience as well as received knowledge.

Writing in the aftermath of the First World War, Benjamin observed, “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?”
(Benjamin, *Storyteller* 84). He suggested that this was because “never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power” (84). To Benjamin, this silence was not in any way altered by a belated recourse to historiography and novels: he commented that “What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth” (Benjamin, *Storyteller* 84).

Similarly, Watkinson’s narrator observes that a silence followed Australia’s own war years: “By the beginning of the 1950s, the survivors were tucking the blanket of silence firmly over those years of death and hardship, 1914 to 1945”, when members of the Masters family die “on the Somme”. At home, another unacknowledged war claims lives: The Grandfather’s first, Aboriginal; wife died “with a bullet through her chest” in “her hut, the home she’d been defending” against white settlers (Watkinson 170). It is this silence that Bill Master’s storytelling and collecting confront, in part through their connection with experience, a crucial aspect of Benjamin’s claims for storytelling — claims which in a more radical configuration, formed the basis of his concept of historical materialist collecting.

Benjamin contended that one limitation of “history” is that “[t]he historian is bound to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals” (Benjamin, *Storyteller* 96). Authorized by explanatory context (and by the dominant powers and discursive structures that comprise this context), history-as-information remains bound to “the moment in which it was new”. In contrast, Benjamin notes that, in a story, “the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 89). The story (associated with oral traditions, but also capable of existing in written form) gains its power
from its reticence, rather than from its origin in the spoken word (and thus an individual speaker’s intention).

Benjamin maintained that “experience” is the basis of the value of storytelling, and is what differentiates it from the novel, and from written history. Elsewhere he would also reject the temporality implied by narrative as a form of historical representation, but in this essay, he does suggest that certain manifestations of narrative can embody the qualities he values: “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 89). Benjamin described this storytelling art as involving the “slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers...perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (Benjamin, “Storyteller”, 93). In The Hanging Tree, it becomes evident that the circular indeterminacy of beginnings and ends in family life, and the three-dimensional, netlike family structure, is something that “history” in a traditional sense struggles to cope with — hence the suitability of the Benjaminian story with its cumulative qualities and lateral connections.

Watkinson’s own narrative structure invites participation in this process to some extent. For instance, she supplements her dual narratives (the Masters family story, and Bill’s own story of his writing and research process) with a family tree diagram as a frontispiece, complete with annotations attributed to Bill Masters as researcher, and with “quotations” from fictional and real sources. This apparent verisimilitude, an example of collecting in its role as an adjunct to narrative, as an information-gathering technique, also opens a space where the reader may become aware of a need for further acts of collecting and story-telling. Family trees may be counted as both an historical source to be consulted by researchers; and as the end product of research — a type of history — but in his study of regionalist fiction, the critic and post-colonial theorist Graham Huggan, in his discussion of textual supplements such as maps, suggests another possibility. He observes that maps, when used as a
frontispiece, function as “an organizational principle” for reading the text (Huggan 21).

Huggan argues that regionalist writers often use maps strategically: their readers, challenged to match the text with the map, may encounter discrepancies and omissions, or the collision between two modes of representation may spark an awareness of the discursive nature of place. Family tree diagrams can also play a similar role. For instance, when juxtaposed with the ambiguities and complexities of the verbally described relationships in _The Hanging Tree_, the inadequacy of the diagram reveals the culturally specific and limited nature of this concept of family.

The diagram also problematizes the link between identity and place. For example, gathering (collecting?) his diverse family into the national fold, Bill Masters states that “Now, in my generation, we’re all just Australian” (Watkinson 28). However, the history of the Masters clan as portrayed in Watkinson’s novel is a history of discrimination and oppression as well as cultural adaptation, suggesting that Bill’s assertion has a hint of irony about it, or at least that it should be regarded with some scepticism. It also reflects a spatially and temporally complex pattern of lineage.

In _The Hanging Tree_, a netlike rather than tree-like structure best evokes the complicated and non-binary structure of the Masters family. The parental bond, although forming visible lines on the “tree”, is often portrayed as ineffectual or even destructive, while, in contrast, relationships with uncles, godparents, nephews, lovers and cousins seem strongest, and the influence — genetic and psychological — of ancestors fades or revives unpredictably through the generations. Lines are extended in different directions, towards varying points of origin and intermarriage between cousins also turns the branching lines back upon themselves, deflecting a forward movement. The relationship between Bill Masters’ collecting and his own often self-reflexive
narrative follows a similarly complex and meandering route. It is in this respect that collecting, in *The Hanging Tree*, is shown (through its connections with experience) to have implications beyond acquisition and control, and to be more than a supplement to story.

3.4 Ghostly Experience: Collecting and the Handing Down of History

“Experience” is a prerequisite for storytelling in *The Hanging Tree*. Bill is told that he doesn’t have enough experience to write the family story: (“Put this story away for a few years, Bill. Get a life first so you can understand what it is you’re writing about” Watkinson 27), and Watkinson wryly indicates the accuracy of this observation (for example, in the contrast between Bill’s insights into his forebears’ troubled lives, and his complacent relationship with his long-suffering partner, Penny). However, experience in the context of Watkinson’s text is not just prior knowledge or wisdom; it is also concurrent with the act of collecting, and in this sense, it offers various ways of slipping “between the lines”.

The mystique, the enchanting quality, attached to heritage is often associated with not only the “handing down”, but also the handling, of items that have been inherited. For example, when Bill Masters inherits a penknife, handling it triggers a ghostly vision of previous owners (Watkinson 9) (and similarly, in *The White Earth*, William’s decision to wear an ancestor’s police hat seems to revive its sinister connections to the past (McGahan 164)). Bill’s heirloom penknife discloses ghosts, first seen at school, when he is wrongly blamed for damage done by a forebear who shares his name: “there was my penknife with the same name engraved on the side of it. I was caned…I came to on the floor, surrounded by dismembered ghosts, with the knife burning in my hand” (Watkinson 10). Bill comments that somehow, “the injustice of being caned opened me to some other person’s experience” (Watkinson 10). This image of movement, opening (or entrance-ing), with its emphasis on process
(experience) rather than the reception of an essential fact, suggests a mobility and contingency about historical knowledge, which to some extent recalls Benjamin’s affirmation of the story as the best form of heritage.

According to Benjamin, “Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience” (Benjamin, Storyteller 92). Benjamin asserted that the story “does not aim to convey the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again” (Benjamin, Storyteller 92). Although Benjamin downplays the importance of “information”, this did not mean that the storyteller was exempt from obligations to the past, or free to create self-serving versions of history. Instead, the discontinuity and singularity of the storytelling process has affinities with the activity of collecting, which he eventually saw as the best way of fulfilling this obligation.

One problem with “experience”, however, is detailed by the historian Inga Clendinnen, who has questioned the historiographical value of imaginative empathy, which supposedly is the particular strength of fiction as a tool for understanding the past. Clendinnen suggested that, for both novelists and historians, empathy might be misleading and difficult to achieve in practice, as a way of understanding the past. She does allow a place for at least partial empathy with another culture, world-view or perspective. For example, discussing contemporary Australian writer Kate Grenville’s controversial novel The Secret River, Clendinnen is critical of Grenville’s inconsistency when she displays a “contemporary delicacy of mind” (19) in refusing to write from the Aboriginal point of view, while not hesitating to “enter” the world of the British settlers. Clendinnen questions, justifiably, whether it is possible or desirable for the novelist or historian to determine a critical point of cultural or
even individual difference where attempts to empathise should be abandoned.

However, she also argues that it is not possible to achieve such empathy reliably without painstaking research, and that, given the sheer scope and complexity of the milieu that produces the perspective in question, it is unlikely that sufficient details will remain for the historical researcher: “Above all: how am I to test my guesses?” (Clendinnen 26). Beyond these practical considerations, though, she notes that the authority of assertions in a novel (unlike those in a historical text) cannot be questioned because ultimately the “contract” with the reader involves an affirmation of the independence of the fictional world. She warns that this may lead to a situation where “an unexamined confidence in empathy tempts us to deny the possibility of significant difference” (Clendinnen 27).

Although the privileging of experience is foregrounded in various ways in The Hanging Tree (particularly through the collecting motif), it seems in some instances to be on unstable ground (though this does not necessarily lessen its value). The concept of “experience” as a foundational point is itself questionable (“To the extent that the concept of experience in general — and of transcendental experience, in Husserl in particular, remains governed by the theme of presence, it participates in the movement of the reduction of the trace” (Derrida 62)). To some extent, Watkinson’s text also undermines its own claims for individual experience as a secure ground of historical knowledge, revealing a problem that is not just about accuracy or bias but has structural implications.

In Benjaminian terms, to be transmissible, a story must be idiosyncratic, contextual, local, and experiential — for example, subject to the serendipity as well as the order of the collection. Accordingly, Watkinson makes her own apparently strong appeal to the authority of personal experience by referring,
in her Author’s Note, to her own research and collecting process. (“In piecing together the Masters family chronology I have delved into diaries, letters, photograph albums and official records held by the history-keepers within my own family” 319). However, her text reveals various sites of tension between the general and the particular, especially in her portrayal of place. Although a particular place, Tallaringa Downs, is central to her characters’ lives (“The land will eventually claim him, heart and mind...He won’t be able to live away from his country for long” Watkinson 265), her prose tends to evoke a rather generalised, generic “outback” of “gum trees” and heat. More significantly, perhaps, this tension is also revealed in her references to collecting and history.

For example, when describing the similarities between her own family history and her fictional family history, Watkinson merely lists things — some that match, some that are different, with no explanation of why these details were selected, rejected or altered: “My grandfather, the returned soldier, grew roses. I remember he had a silver penknife...I remember finding an AIF uniform button in my grandmother’s shoebox of collected miscellanea. I remember vases of cut roses throughout the house” (Watkinson 320). Watkinson implies that her story’s value may be traced to its origins in uniqueness: her own memories and her family’s specific experiences. However, she also emphasizes that her experiences, and those she describes, mirror those of numerous informants: “literally hundreds of other Queenslanders who have shared their family histories and memories with me” (321).

While it might matter for the story’s political implications that “hundreds of other” Queenslanders have been interviewed in her research, why does it matter if the “silver penknife”, the roses, or the smell of silk, specifically, had real counterparts? As Watkinson’s “Note” implies, the story must also be more than just “hers” — it must be general, repeatable, even universal and also externally verifiable: her “Author’s Note”, “outside” the story, is required to
validate something that she is implying is already valid, that is, a story drawn from personal experience.

The equivocal, problematic yet important nature of experience is reflected again in *The Hanging Tree* in Bill Masters’ encounters with the unnerving, but historically fruitful, effects of collecting, such as the incident with his heirloom penknife. The penknife has “been to war” and is a “godfather present” (Watkinson 11), but its potential symbolic function as an instrument of a legacy of patriarchal Western power, in which the “pen” and the “sword” merge, is undercut by the ghostly revelations that it elicits. One such incident occurs when Bill hands the knife to his cousin: “I placed the knife on his palm. Deliberately. Carefully. His eyes widened. He swore and dropped the knife…I knew he’d have his eyes closed, shutting out whatever he had seen. The ghosts” (Watkinson 9). Beyond its paranormal associations, though, the knife is responsible for another uncanny experience. Collected as a sign of continuing bloodlines, family lines, the knife is inscribed with the name “Wilson Masters”, which the narrator, Bill, shares with many of his relatives:

Now I am my uncle…I remember how he wrote my name, our name, there, see, above the red ink stamp of the old school crest. See how the W and the M loop and whirl in the characteristic way of my signature. Our signature. This is who we are (Watkinson 6).

As a knife, though, designed for incision, it also cuts across this experience, across lines of identity, and of time and place (“Now I am my uncle…Our signature…Except, we are not the same”) with uncanny effects.

Similar qualities characterize the process of collecting carried out by Bill Masters; a blend of methodical, publicly accountable research (crosschecking memories and stories with evidence from homestead diaries, tally books, and other sources) and unsystematic private reverie, from which his stories are drawn. Bill’s storytelling is inspired by his discovery of a personal letter from a family friend, Jan, marking a place in a book of First World War poetry that
belonged to his late uncle. The war poetry is only indirectly related to the incidents of Bill’s family history, but the value of the book is partly its provenance — it “had belonged to one of my uncles” — and partly its enchanting power; its ability to induce a dreaming state.

Bill notes that he finds himself “returning to [it] again and again. It pulled me in between its lines where I would linger for ages. Just thinking.” (Watkinson 3) Bill experiences the book in multiple ways, which, within the dreamy flow of thoughts induced by the text, also involves, like the penknife signature, the slippage of the uncanny: “I just turn the pages slowly, smelling the aging paper, thinking and remembering, and then I become other than myself, slipping into the minds of my characters, my family.” (Watkinson 6).

Watkinson seems to suggest that this effect arises, in part from the juncture, or silent space, between two fragmentary and not especially informative texts: a particular poem, which is singled out by a “makeshift bookmark” — an unfinished letter bearing the marks of its own Benjaminian salvage and revaluation. The bookmark/letter is a “piece of notepaper folded and refolded into a thin strip”, discarded and then recovered by someone who “smoothed the crumpled page, folded and refolded it, and placed it in an anthology” (Watkinson 5). Despite the quietude of Watkinson’s imagery, Bill’s experience of the relationship between the two texts is also, in one sense, reminiscent of Benjamin’s account of the “shock” which differentiates historical materialist collecting from conventional historiography:

Universal history...is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle...Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock. (Benjamin, “Theses” 262)

Other instances of collecting in *The Hanging Tree* involve similar forms of interaction with the Tallaringa garden and wider landscape. Even the rose
garden is a place where the uncanny may be encountered: improbably, among the “regimented roses, each bush equidistant Like the tea bushes in Darjeeling...Three perfect imperial feet” (Watkinson 35)), repressed fears are contained and hallucinations are triggered, and “[t]he garden waits for something that delays” (Watkinson 3).

As well, traces of shadowy spirit figures are discovered as several of the characters in the novel, including the young doctor, Jan Murray, and her friends and lovers among the Masters family, collect or gather natural items — leaves, feathers and snakeskins. Bill’s narrative links the leaves to Aboriginal cultural heritage (for instance, Ben Masters’ emu totem; the spirits that inhabit the “Guardian Gums” which form the garden’s boundary; the “Rainbow Serpent” mentioned at the novel’s conclusion) but their actual identity is unstable, inconclusive. The leaves, especially, are small curios or signs that almost casually cross boundaries (natural detritus? cultural artefact? private code?), and the various items eventually reappear towards the end of the novel, in a reference to a “mobile” that hangs in a Masters family bedroom (Watkinson 299).

Watkinson (like McGahan in The White Earth) indicates that this instability of identity is attributable to illness — Jan Murray’s feverish hallucinations, Jock Masters’ psychiatric disturbances — each, in turn, traceable to post-traumatic stress of one sort or another. These stresses include Jock’s experience of the violence of Vietnam and Jan’s struggle to improve living conditions in a neglected Aboriginal community, Moondoo Mission. However, Watkinson’s text also emphasizes that, from Bill Masters’ viewpoint, such experiences of shape-shifting and haunting are not represented as pathological but as fruitful, even normal. They propel both Bill’s story and the development of deeper family relationships.
An element of this shape-shifting informs Watkinson’s text too, in the form of the relationship between the dual narratives of Bill’s family story. Rather than a traditional episodic structure of clearly marked chapters, Watkinson uses short sections of text, which alternate Bill’s story of his own research and writing process, with the “story itself”: vignettes, like the “memories” he used to “file away”. These vignettes are categorized by place (“Tallaringa Downs: The Head Stockman” (29)); “Brisbane, January 1977: Monica Masters” (296)), and captioned like images in a scrapbook.

These vignettes presented as the viable if not wholly reliable result of negotiation, conversation, interpretation, evidence, guesswork and experience. In the novel, they are separated from Bill’s own story (during which his own family also reshapes itself, as children are conceived and older kinship connections are reconceived) by a typographic element; not words, but an image — a tiny leaf symbol. Like a book with real leaves pressed between the paper leaves (lignin and line), “real” and “representation”, past and present, cause and effect, foreground and background oscillate through the text, in a circling motion.

The use of the “circle” motif in The Hanging Tree is very consciously self-reflexive: even Bill, for instance, when checking a “fact” with one of his interview subjects, is caught within t/his circle: “‘Why did you crack up like that?’ I asked Jan. She smiled... ‘Because I felt the circle shift.’ ‘No, come on, Jan, don’t shit me. The turning circle is a narrative device, my invention. What really happened?’ “(Watkinson 228). The arc of a circle also suggests the interruption caused by the movement of collecting, something which perhaps has a similar effect to the “digression” in narrative, which Susan Stewart suggests “stands in tension with narrative closure” (30).

Likewise, for Bill Masters, an important part of collecting is the handling of objects, or “drawing ...stories from the side of my eye, quickly, without
agonising over words” (2). He avoids the kind of story that “didn’t mind being imprisoned on the page” (2). This oblique approach (reminiscent, perhaps, of the “soft cartography” (Falconer 70) that delineates Eureka’s love for Harry in *The Service of Clouds*) provides glimpses of “ghosts”, like the benign spirits that live in the “Guardian Gums” at *Tallaringa*, as well as other, more disturbing apparitions.

The “experience” endorsed by Watkinson as an effect of storytelling and, especially, collecting, seems to offer more to historical knowledge than simply the guesswork of imaginative empathy or the credibility of verifiable data. In *The Hanging Tree*, Bill Masters also discovers that even the more informal act of storytelling is fraught with the sort of risks Clendinnen describes — for instance, in the act of creating his family story, he becomes a colonist of sorts, speaking with others’ voices. Consulting his cousin about his writing technique which involves portraying some characters “as...observed, but not observing” (Watkinson 234), Bill explains that “the Ben character... hasn’t told me any of his memories...I can’t go there” (Watkinson 234). However, during his research and negotiations, Bill is encouraged by his family to “Use a bit of imagination” or risk doing their “memory a disservice” (Watkinson 234).

Bill’s relatives’ comments perhaps suggest that the historian’s search for truth must take account of the “fictional” aspect of language in general — a view that is to some extent unresolved in *The Hanging Tree*, where the relationship between historical fact and story remains problematic. This lack of resolution, however, has implications of its own for Watkinson’s treatment of the broader problems of ownership of the past and its representations, particularly through her threefold model of storytelling, history-keeping, and standard history.

In many ways, the value of attributed to collecting in *The Hanging Tree* — as a digressive, experiential and empirical process of interruption and slippage—
do recall Benjamin’s notion of collecting, and his criticism of conventional historiography. In *The Hanging Tree*, though, the circumstances with which Watkinson engages differ somewhat from the situation that gave rise to Benjamin’s theorising: in her novel, “history” has multiple identities. The term “history-keeper” suggests a curator or guardian of a collection, of items “received” or salvaged from the past, preserved intact — an idea that Benjamin rejected. However, the history/story opposition established by Benjamin emerges as culturally grounded rather than universal.

For instance, Benjamin’s “history” is a usually a public document, whereas in the context of Aboriginal culture and especially in the post-colonial environment depicted in *The Hanging Tree*, “history” may be private, even secret. Watkinson’s refusal to elaborate on the “Gorge community”, the traditional branch of the Masters family, is a precarious tactic. Although Watkinson perhaps risks repeating the “blanket of silence” (Watkinson 170) she also makes it clear the silence can be a form of defensive power, or a sign of respect. Her narrator comments that he “will not write much about The Gorge for, in our family, it is a private place...I won’t speak of The Gorge community’s daily rituals or routines” (Watkinson 246).

Paradoxically, to prevent the recurrence of the post-war “silence”, another silence is solicited — for instance, through traditional initiation rites, where history-keepers are marked by scars (“cicatrices” Watkinson 311). These lines of learning and access and heritage are also lines of exclusion and possession. Exactly what the “history-keeping” is must be concealed by a wall of silence, a boundary which possibly cannot be breached without manifesting a form of cultural imperialism. Thus there is no way of determining exactly what is meant, in this context, by “history-keeping” — whether this “history” resembles the history-telling and chronicling that Benjamin endorses, or the explanatory history he condemns. Moreover, Watkinson indicates that, to avoid further disenfranchisement and injustice, silence must also be respected.
by those (including “storytellers” (Watkinson 247)) outside the lines of
initiation — even if it is a silence that lets “history” remain, provisionally, as a
parallel, enigmatic, unresolved strand, alongside “story”.

I conclude that the three strands of history-keeping, storytelling and collecting
in this novel provide a usefully diffuse model for approaching Australia’s past
and the associated issues of heritage, identity and place. The threefold
imbrication of historical knowledges resembles the patterns of “detours and
returns” traced by the collectors and history-seekers in Brian Castro’s The
Garden Book, and by Benjamin’s storyteller, for whom, as Benjamin
commented, “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal
concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this
counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story” (Benjamin
“Storyteller” 86).

Watkinson’s vision of collecting’s relationship with narrative and its historical
potential is not as radical and comprehensive as it is in Benjamin’s later
theories or in Castro’s The Garden Book. However, Walter Benjamin claimed
that “the nature of every real story [is that it] contains, openly or covertly,
something useful” (Benjamin “Storyteller” 86). I suggest that “story” in The
Hanging Tree usually entails a significant engagement with the act or
experience of collecting as something that is also “useful”, insofar as it is not
simply subordinate to narrative, but offers a pivotal and entrancing moment of
silence, which permits the ghostly crossing of lines between text and world
and allows repressed hi/stories to emerge.
4. WILD THINGS: Collecting and Exploring in Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*

Andrew McGahan’s 2004 novel *The White Earth* is set in the Darling Downs region of southern Queensland, at the time of the introduction of Native Title legislation in 1993. It focuses on the efforts of one family to gain and maintain ownership of the vast grazing property, Kuran Station. In his novel, McGahan draws on two significant aspects of earlier Australian literature, the familiar trope of exploration, and the lesser-known Colonial Gothic genre, as way of addressing contemporary concerns about indigenous land rights and questions about “settler” society’s identity, legitimacy and responsibility. Unlike Brian Castro, McGahan does not incorporate collecting techniques as a structural device, but as I will argue in this chapter, the collecting motif still has significant implications for his novel’s plot and themes, especially his concern with the ways that both narrative and material objects are implicated in the intricate paradoxes and disturbing logic that shape conflict over land and identity in Australian society.

In this chapter, I outline the nature of the conflicting claims portrayed in McGahan’s novel, and consider the role of material objects like relics and ruins in his depiction of the different perceptions of temporality and tenure which underpin these claims. I argue that McGahan’s use of collecting motifs and imagery (including his references to stories and relics) forms a distinctive aspect of his representation of materiality and, overall, contribute to his problematization of history, by emphasizing the disruptive and entrance-ing rather than redemptive possibilities of tropes of hauntedness.

4.1 Lodging Claims: Taking Hold of Country in Post-Colonial Australia

McGahan’s text discloses an entangled web of overlapping social and political rhetoric and claims to place and history, which extends across, and beyond,
post-colonial Australian society. The novel centres on the conflict between members of one family (John McIvor and his great-nephew William; William’s mother; and McIvor’s estranged adult daughter Ruth) over the ownership of Kuran Station. However, these tensions are heightened by the shadowy presence of other possible claims to ownership of Kuran, including those of the displaced descendants of Kuran’s Aboriginal owners; the government, which presents a suspected legislative threat to McIvor’s property rights, and even McIvor’s housekeeper, Mrs Griffith. As I discuss below, McGahan’s Gothic-inflected use of collecting motifs play an important role in revealing the complexity and nuances of these claims.

The claims on which the novel centres are those of McGahan’s protagonists, William and his great-uncle John McIvor. Descendants of Kuran Station’s former manager, they are the successors to a series of squatters — most recently the aptly named White family, who had rebuffed McIvor’s hopes of one day marrying into the wealthy dynasty and thereby possessing the land he had worked with his father. For the Whites, the right to the land that forms Kuran Station is conferred simply by the privilege of class and wealth, and by a discursive and economic structure centred in Britain through which place is, in a sense, already marked out and defined, even before its “discovery”. In contrast, for McIvor, who personifies Kuran Station as a live entity with agency and even consciousness, ownership (although also involving the concept of heritage and the seductiveness of possession and control) is a more localised, ethically complex and uncertain matter, which even involves some empathy with indigenous attitudes to “country”.

However, as the critic Emily Potter notes, McIvor also takes advantage of Western culture’s association of “meaning” with “material presence” (Potter 180) to dismiss Aboriginal claims: “Only traditional owners can lodge a claim, Will. And none of them are left…They’re all dead, or they were taken away long ago…So I claim Native Title” (McGahan 294). Although the exact details of
the Aboriginal inhabitants’ connection to the land remain enigmatic, McGahan indicates that the relative lack of material evidence does not inhibit their continuing ghostly presence. This is emphasized by his use of collecting motifs to evoke a Gothic atmosphere in which themes of injustice, guilt, and retribution emerge in the context of relics, ruins, haunted houses and eerie landscapes.

In this thesis, I refer extensively to Emily Potter’s ecologically-oriented reading of McGahan’s text because it provides many useful insights into the role of materiality in the text, and also draws attention to the role of nature and ecology in contemporary post-colonial discourse. However, I extend Potter’s reading of the text by referring to Jennifer Rutherford’s Lacanian analysis of nationalism and the rhetoric of the “good”, and using a framework of aspects of collecting theory (particularly Walter Benjamin’s collecting-based dialectical conception of history and nature; and psychoanalytic theory’s notion of the fetish) to shed further light on the implications of McGahan’s portrayal of these attempts to possess place and history. My argument focuses on the relationship between the House, the land and the collection; and also considers the role of allusions to narrative and story, as well as tropes of materiality, in McGahan’s text.

In an Australian context, colonial Gothic writing often reflected an uneasy sense of place that was both an imported trope and a localized response to the unfamiliar and “unhomely” conditions (and illegitimacy) of the British colonists. McGahan incorporates some of the genre’s common devices in his novel to illustrate and problematizing his protagonists’ attempts to establish or consolidate their rights to Kuran Station, as well as drawing attention more generally to some of the nuances, inconsistencies and complexities of competing claims to place and identity in post-colonial Australia. Below, I explain why images of haunting landscapes haunt settler narratives, and how the Colonial Gothic trope of the haunted house responds to this. I then discuss
the way that McGahan uses collecting motifs to illustrate his protagonists’ attempts to consolidate their claims to Kuran Station; to draw attention to the complexity and “rivenness” (McCredden 16) of these claims; and also to problematize them.

4.2 Relics and Ruins: Materiality, Collecting, and the Unhousedness of History

As *The White Earth* illustrates, the hi/stories which support “settler” claims to place and identity have to deal with multiple displacements: the act of indigenous dispossession, the challenges of linguistic adaptation to an unfamiliar landscape, and the rhetorical challenges associated with a place where, as the critic Jennifer Rutherford observes, “every act of housing is coterminously an act of unhousing” (“Undwelling” 114). Rutherford notes that, from Marcus Clarke to Patrick White and David Malouf, "the trope of the unhoused subject...has reverberated throughout white Australian literature" (“Undwelling” 120).

Likewise, McGahan’s appropriation of the colonial Gothic genre is exemplified, in this text, by his depiction of McIvor’s collection of relics, which also evokes a sense of unhousedness. The haunted and haunting relic collection lies at the heart of McIvor’s property, in the crumbling Kuran House; yet it is not fully at the centre of and does not confine its influence to the House. As both Crouch and Gelder have observed, in Australian ghost stories, the “effects of localised hauntings bleed out across the nation, influencing a broader sense of the nation’s well-being” (Crouch 5).

McGahan’s use of collecting motifs contributes to several recurring place-related images in the novel that also reflect this sense of unhousedness, and various responses to it: the labyrinth, the inland sea, the web of stories, the sleeping /speaking giant. It also contributes to McGahan’s depiction of his protagonists’ effort (and failure) to legitimize their possession of Kuran Station
by sustaining a temporal “housing” or containment of history, in which the past remains safely quarantined from the present.

Emily Potter’s “ecological” reading of in *The White Earth* provides a useful starting point for my discussion, below, of the roles played by the collecting motif in creating this sense of uncanny displacement, insofar as the collection forms an important focus for the images of material decay, preservation and loss which inform the “ecological” poetics of temporal contamination that Potter identifies in the novel.

As a significant element of McGahan’s emphasis on materiality and heritage, collecting has implications for the approach to the relationships between place and history which emerge in his text. According to Emily Potter, the portrayal of the material world in McGahan’s novel offers an understanding of temporality that emphasizes the continuing impact of an intangible and elusive past; a past with which continues to confront later generations with questions of responsibility and accountability, and refuses simple answers. She refers to this perspective as an “ecological poetics of memory”, insofar as it includes “spatial, material, and relational motifs” that suggest an alternative view of history, one that involves “non-linear temporalities” and “scrambles discrete categories” (Potter 180).

Potter does not specifically discuss collecting. However, I suggest that McGahan’s uses of the collecting motif in *The White Earth* insofar exemplifies many of the “ontological possibilities” and implications for history and post-colonial poetics that Potter attributes more generally to his portrayal of the material world, while also problematizing the concepts from which this notion of “ecopoetics” emerges. Underpinning the McLvor family’s claims to Kuran Station, for instance, is a hoard of relics concealed at the heart of Kuran House, as well as a legacy of stories that William must learn, and earn, to claim his heritage, but which remain elusive as William’s quest leads him in the
footsteps of earlier, ghostly explorers. In this chapter, I will focus mainly on McGahan’s allusions to this collection and other material relics, although I will also consider his emphasis on William’s heritage of stories as another important manifestation of the collecting motif in McGahan’s text.

The collecting of relics has long been a part of what Potter describes as “Western culture’s need for visibility and material presence in order to map, know, and ultimately stand outside historical knowledge” (Potter 180). In such a context, even the ruin, with its signs of degradation and impending loss, supports a sense that history can be viewed and thus known from a secure standpoint — a present that is safely isolated from a distant past: “the ruin articulates linear time and affords a direct link to the past through its material presence” (Potter 179).

In her description of the “ontological possibilities” implicit in the value attributed to Kuran House by William and his great-uncle, Potter notes that “[i]n… the Western tradition, material presence…is equated with life; its absence with death and finality” (178). In this context, the continued, tangible existence of objects like ruins and relics may provide a sense of stability, which transcends the vicissitudes of context and temporal flow, and a sense of intimacy with history, while also ensuring that the (absent) past seems redundant, except as a secure reference point for authorising the present. Potter’s analysis stops short, however, of discussing the significance, in McGahan’s novel, of various modes of interaction with this materiality. I suggest that his text also demonstrates that the effects of “visibility and material presence” may be intensified and inflected or deflected by the objects’ inclusion in a collection.

As I contend throughout this thesis, the act of collecting something (whether relics, information, or stories) entails a process of physical removal or symbolic detachment, which has several possible implications for representations of
history. Placed in the framing context of the collection, preserved from further deterioration or change, yet deliberately separated from its context of origin, the items enter a different realm. Without the original context of the source, other aspects of the collected item are freed for reinterpretation and, in the case of material objects especially, the medium may receive renewed attention.

Although Benjamin identified a more radical historical potential in this collecting process, the collection may, from a more conventional perspective, function as a site of historical control and containment. However, as I discuss below, McGahan’s description of William’s discovery of McIvor’s private museum uses the collecting motif to emphasize the failure of this centre. His portrayal of McIvor’s museum underscores the failure of such temporal and epistemological containment. It also reiterates a pervasive tension between the property’s dual elements; the drought-stricken yet compelling and enigmatic landscape; and its nominal centre and McIvor’s headquarters, the grand and mysterious but decrepit and unhomely homestead, Kuran House.

_The Labyrinth_

McGahan’s allusions to collecting begin with his portrayal of the “cabinet” or container of a collection, in the form of Kuran House. In an echo of the disappointment experienced by European explorers mapping Australia, William’s arrival at Kuran Station is marked by unease and disappointment as, “[d]ay by day, William mapped out the House”, discovering a “labyrinth” of dilapidation, with “no centre...no core of warmth like a single living room or kitchen” (McGahan 33).

This failure of the centre becomes clearer as the novel progresses. During William’s first explorations of the station, he discovers only bleak ruins and signs of decay, and his experiences lead to a sense of foreboding that “the upper floor of the House would be the same, dark and filthy, and that his uncle
slept on a stained mattress in some derelict room” (McGahan 69). William’s fears are partially confirmed when, in the absence of his intimidating great-uncle, he investigates the mysterious upper floors of his daunting new home. When he finds his way to the forbidden first floor of Kuran House and his great-uncle’s private quarters, he realizes, however, to his surprise, that McIvor’s bedroom is not “the darkest and coldest of all the chambers” (McGahan 152). Instead, the room, apparently the former bedroom of the previous owner, Elizabeth White, is refreshingly bright and retains traces of White’s presence (“it felt strangely like a woman lived here, not a man” (McGahan 153).

Despite the brightness and light, the atmosphere of Gothic romance remains: there is something disturbing about McIvor’s inhabitation and preservation of Elizabeth White’s room years after she rejects him; and when William finally does discover the core of Kuran House, it is even more troubling. This core is the museum-room where various enigmatic artefacts are housed in “a tall cabinet, faced with glass…a large wooden trunk” and surrounded by other signs of sinister purpose: “a long workbench, littered with tools”, a selection of guns, and a telescope, “an instrument lurking in that red space” (McGahan 153). With its oppressive, “weirdly crimson” darkness and grisly “blood red walls”, forms a somewhat melodramatic contrast, visually and viscerally, to McIvor’s white bedroom.

In spite of McIvor’s attempts to encase and secure his collection, even the room in which it is kept is incomplete in itself. The labyrinth still has no centre — insofar as William finds that it may be best be understood through its connection with the white room, which is outward looking: “White light enfolded him...white curtains...drifted in front of clear, sunlit windows” (McGahan 152). This room has no central core, unlike the red room with its cabinets of relics. In the “white room”, the visual allusions to the unattainable and absent Elizabeth White suggest her presence is all-enveloping, yet at the
same time, the fact of her physical existence seems, in a way, improbable, dissolved as it is into a play on words. The museum-room is not simply a counterpoint to the bedroom, but a counterpart, “another glimpse into his uncle’s soul. A disturbing one, this time” (McGahan 153). The juxtaposition of the inwardly focused and disturbingly corporeal museum room, with its ethereal counterpart, the White bedroom, a place of absence, reiterates that the labyrinth of Kuran House has no centre. The rooms are not only a sign of psychological turmoil but also perhaps a metaphor for McIvor’s doomed attempt to consolidate his ownership, in an organic, embodied whole.

The Sea

Just as the “container” of McIvor’s collection, Kuran House, has implications for the strategies of containment and possession depicted by McGahan, so do the artefacts that it contains. For instance, the relics in McIvor’s museum reiterate and reinforce the disruptive effects of the uncanny, by alluding to the traditional Australian literary tropes of explorers and “unhoused” settlers. McGahan’s depiction of these relics draws attention to, and problematizes, the role of these tropes in legitimizing “settler” claims.

As I will discuss later, in the context of Jennifer Rutherford’s analysis of the rhetoric of the “Good” Australian, McIvor’s ambivalent attitude to the “discoverer” of Kuran Station, Alfred Kirchmeyer, provides one clue to McIvor’s sense of his right to possess Kuran Station. McIvor regards the explorer with some disdain, noting that the, “barely beat the first settlers” (McGahan 161) and died without “anything to report” (McGahan 162). Without the rhetorical work of description and communication, the discovered country does not come fully into existence until the almost simultaneous arrival of “settlers”, whose physical work opens the space, marking out properties and earning “rights” (McGahan 130).
However, the tenuous nature of McIvor’s strategy becomes clearer when William enters the forbidden “red room”. Among the relics that he discovers are items that (his great-uncle later explains) were owned by Kirchmeyer, who was buried on Kuran after a failed and “pathetic” expedition to the Darling Downs region. There is also a rather sinister telescope, a “device possessed, somehow, of a watching, predatory intelligence”; an “older instrument that spoke of sailing ships and the sea...William could almost picture the old man hunched to the eyepiece, sweeping the dark ocean of the plains, a captain in search of land, or of a sail upon the horizon” (McGahan 153). In this nautical image, William’s uncle, through his attempt to possess Kuran Station, is aligned with the explorer, despite his expressed ambivalence about his efforts.

Like other explorers and “settlers”, too, McIvor finds that his early explorations of Queensland, seeking work during the Depression years, are also failures: he realizes that “the properties in the far west proved to be nothing like Kuran. They were vast, scorched, empty things” (McGahan 73), and he “hated the cities with their crowds and squalor...the coasts with their...tropical jungles, and the great emptiness of the west, naked and red, oppressed him” (McGahan 74). For McIvor, the quest for the “inland sea” is displaced to the more congenial topography of the Darling Downs. McGahan’s descriptions of the Kuran Plains frequently emphasize their sea-like quality, including the black soil’s depth and its watery instability. For example, as William and his mother travel towards the foothills where Kuran Station is located, for example, the “black soil... [became] shallow as the hills grew near, like an ocean nearing a coastline” (McGahan 14).

Although the Kuran Plains, with their deep black soils, are an equivalent of such a sea, they fail (according to McIvor) to sustain the possibility of roots, whether agricultural or metaphysical. Instead, a secret waterhole on Kuran Station represents, to McIvor, the ultimate “inland sea” which explorers failed to find in the continent’s centre. The passages where John McIvor explains the
difference between his ownership of Kuran Station and that of the farmers of
the Kuran Plains evoke much of the ambivalence and complexity that surround
the issue of “non-indigenous belonging” (Potter 177) in Australia. They also
reinforce the tension, in the novel, between the colonial Gothic motifs of
haunted house and haunting landscape.

In an Australian context, colonial Gothic writing often reflected an uneasy
sense of place that was both an imported trope and a localized response to
the unfamiliar and “unhomely “conditions (and illegitimacy) of the British
“settlers”. McGahan incorporates some of its common devices in his novel,
including references to haunted landscapes and an intimidating natural
environment. As McGahan’s text reveals (in part through his use of collecting
motifs) the trope of ecology and related representations of nature and
landscape in Australian settler colony discourse has a complex role in colonial
and post-colonial discourse, not only as a response to “settler” society’s
unease and concerns about legitimacy, but also as a way of reinforcing its
claims to belonging and possession, in ways that reflect the moral and political
complexity of post-colonial society.

In the remainder of this chapter, I refer to Ann Curthoy’s analysis of the role of
the trope of “hostile nature” in supporting non-indigenous Australians’
justification of their [post] colonial presence, and to Jennifer Rutherford’s use
of psychoanalytic theory to explain the roles of collecting and storytelling in of
notions of environmental sympathy, care, and preservation in establishing
“settler” claims to legitimacy. I compare this with Emily Potter’s reading of the
ecological implications of McGahan’s references to materiality, and I contend
that McGahan’s use of collecting motifs illustrates yet also problematizes
these rhetorical and discursive strategies. Further, in the context of the
possible “redemptive” tendencies of tropes related to post-colonial
hauntedness, I consider how McGahan’s Gothic-inflected portrayal of
collecting provides images of “nature” and “culture” which both unsettle and
uphold the notion of an ecological poetics, which, Potter argues, is embodied in McGahan’s allusions to materiality.

4.3 Haunting Landscapes

The natural environment, as historian Ann Curthoys has noted, plays an important role in the equivocal character of current discourses of Australian identity, in which “non-indigenous Australians demonstrate elements of both a colonial and a post-colonial mentality. Post-colonial mentalities are evident, as indigenous peoples point to, and others acknowledge a history of invasion and dispossession... in order to move beyond the colonial past”. However, she also comments that many non-indigenous Australians have “difficulty... in acknowledging a history of land-taking, massacres, and child removal, much preferring to see themselves as the historical victim” and notes that “[c]olonial mentalities ... are... evident”, particularly in the way that many “Australians of British descent... see themselves as victims of hostile nature and of other nations.” (Curthoys, “An Uneasy Conversation” 3).

Similar attitudes may be traced in McGahan’s depiction of the history and landscape of Kuran Station, but although nature is sometimes portrayed as unwelcoming in The White Earth; the implications that emerge in McGahan’s text are more complex than those described by Curthoys. McGahan describes William’s first encounter with the country around Kuran House as initially uninspiring, then frightening (and an echo, perhaps, of the lost child image that was common in Australian colonial literature). Reflecting, perhaps, the sense of monotony that Europeans often identified in the Australian landscape, McGahan uses repetitive language and generic details: “the grass beyond... the knot of gum trees... brown and brittle tussocks... another broad grassy crest... there were a small, shallow valley. Beyond it another hill...yet more hills” (McGahan 64-65). Soon, though, William is lost and the country becomes hostile and the imagery very Gothic:
there was only more grass and trees...parts... were still unexplored...there was the faintest scent of rotting in the air. They were an awful place, the hills...deceitful, they tricked and misled and were full of dead things, gravestones and creeping trees on walls and empty eyes set in skulls (McGahan 69).

By associating this with Mclvor’s sometimes questionable interpretation of ecological unity and his ethic of (land) care; and by utilizing some of the tropes of the Gothic genre, McGahan’s text reveals — and to some extent interrogates — another post-colonial inflexion to the trope of “hostile nature”. This takes the form of a conflation of ecological, ethical and spiritual paradigms, in which the challenges of responsible environmental management (dramatized in The White Earth by the ominous effects of an almost unprecedented drought) entail an acknowledgement, but also possibly a potential displacement, of concerns over the injustices and atrocities of Aboriginal dispossession.

Mclvor, for instance, informs William that “[t]here are folk out there who believe that the Aborigines are the only ones who understand the land...They think...that we don’t understand the country, that we just want to exploit it...We can have connections with the land too, our own kind of magic. The land talks to me” (McGahan 181). Consequently, he affirms his commitment to the land by collecting stories and appropriating sacred sites, choosing the so-called bora rings where “something is present. Something comes alive” as the site for his rally against Native Title, and beginning his storytelling at the waterhole on Kuran Station, which he considers to be the “source of the biggest river in Australia” (McGahan 104): it is “really the beginning” (McGahan 104).

This ethic of care and sense of magical or spiritual connections extends to the process of collecting. It is exemplified, albeit ambiguously, by Mclvor’s careful preservation of relics and it also has an indirect link, insofar as it is associated
with another part of McIvor’s strategy, the collecting of stories. To prove
William’s suitability as an heir to Kuran Station, McIvor sets William the task of
learning Kuran’s own stories, through listening to McIvor and through
exploring the property himself. It could be argued that William is therefore
engaged in a form of collecting, especially as his explorations of Kuran
gradually develop a quest-like character. I suggest that both these strategies of
possession can be explored fruitfully from the perspective of collecting theory
and its notions of ownership; enchantment and the fetish; objectification,
meaning, and materiality.

4.4 The Speaking Giant

McGahan makes it clear that McIvor’s ownership of Kuran Station is
established by more than agricultural and economic success: true ownership,
for McIvor, is secured by knowledge, in the form of a heritage of stories.
McIvor contrasts the “organic” identity of Kuran Station with the supposedly
mechanistic quality of other farms, including the property of William’s father:
“Your farm was a machine, a factory to grow wheat. But this isn’t anything like
that. This is a piece of country…alive in its own right. It has a history. It’s
growing and changing all the time. It breathes” (McGahan 85).

McGahan writes that McIvor “loved the wide golden spread of the
plains, and the hills that swept up smoothly in the east…Most of all, he
loved Kuran House. So solid and secure and rooted in the earth…since
[the owner’s] funeral, the great stone building had stood empty…the
station lacked what it needed most — a living, beating heart”
(McGahan 52).

Although, down on the plains, successful farmers build houses “set on
concrete slabs that floated upon the black soil like rafts” (McGahan 8), this
superficially successful adaptation is, in McIvor’s terms, inadequate. Such
“settlers” are, in his view, still “unsettled”; still “unhoused” and unsecured.
Their relationship to their properties is, in McIvor’s terms, less legitimate than
his relationship with Kuran Station, which requires the depth that a heritage of stories can provide.

The response to this, in McIvor’s terms, is a conception of knowledge that goes beyond the empirical and pragmatic: although he had originally regarded land purely as an inanimate thing”, he gradually begins to “to hear a voice in it, meant specifically for human ears” (McGahan 100). It involves an understanding of place that has a dynamic temporal dimension: “It’s one thing to know where a piece of land is. It’s another to know where it came from” (McGahan 80): stories, and not survey grids, articulate space: “if you’re going to own it...[y]ou have to know where it fits in. You don’t just buy a few square miles and put up a fence and say, This is it” (McGahan 106-107).

McIvor observes that every “stretch of earth has its own story...Stories that involve the whole country in the end” (McGahan 106). To some extent, this image closely resembles Jillian Watkinson’s reference to stories, heritage and space in The Hanging Tree: “A family story spreads from horizon to horizon...it fills the whole massive circle” (Watkinson 27). Whereas Watkinson’s “family story” is singular and ever expanding, however, for McGahan’s characters, stories are local and discrete. Nevertheless, for the sense of orientation and identity that McIvor seeks: “knowing where you belong and taking responsibility for that place” (McGahan 109), lateral connections to other stories are crucial.

McIvor’s achievements, like those of other successful farmers, are dependent partly on practical knowledge: (“John had known every inch of the land, good and bad, since he was a child” (McGahan 75); “The smart farmers, they get their land professionally surveyed and then arrange their paddocks into contour banks” (McGahan 107)). William realizes that “Knowledge...was the issue. Knowledge was the essence of ownership” (McGahan 181).
Lack of knowledge has dire practical consequences, as McIvor emphasizes when he explains the reasons for the failure of William’s father’s own small farm. McIvor accounts for this failure as an anomaly; it is a pocket of poor ground in the rich territory of the Kuran Plains: “how can you run out of soil when it’s sixty feet deep? But it’s not the same everywhere. There are shallower, sandy places. I don’t know where they came from, but when it was all pasture you could see the bad patches plain as day” (McGahan 107). McIvor’s explanation also reveals that the “bad patch” implies more than just bad luck and poor management.

When, on his last day in his old home, William goes out to “say his farewells”, he senses that it has become a “foreign place”. The house and sheds are empty and the grain paddock where his father dies in a header fire has become “a field of ash, an alien place that had afflicted the whole farm” (McGahan 11-12). Similarly, the failed farm itself is a place that threatens more than just its owners’ livelihood. It is an outbreak of the “thinness” that McIvor mentions in his description of Australia: “that’s Australia for you. It’s big…but it’s thin too…most of the soil is just dust” (McGahan 105), and the farm’s “bare dusty yard” and fruitless trees and vegetable garden represent, in the context of the novel’s themes, the always-present potential for failure in the colonial project. The knowledge that McIvor seeks runs deeper than agricultural or geological expertise.

McGahan’s references to stories, in association with his deployment of collecting motifs, reveal that McIvor’s reverence for preservation and continuity also entails a more dynamic and processual view of place and history, through which he aspires to identify with the land’s indigenous owners, and so transcend the claims of the “squatters” who preceded him. Among the various stories of Kuran that McIvor recounts for his nephew’s benefit, McIvor’s topographical story best exemplifies his sense of place and history as a dynamic, organic, but unified entity. The story complements an
earlier, geomorphological history ("Go back a few hundred million years...You wouldn't be able to find the station...the hills or the plains" McGahan 80) and traces Kuran’s connections right across Australia, and then places it in a global context ("the river finally reaches the sea. Way down near Adelaide. The other end of the country. Of course, the Murray is nothing like the Amazon or the Mississippi or the Nile" (McGahan 105). His story for William is also a verbal map, the second of its kind in the text (in the first chapter, McGahan also provides a carefully detailed description of William’s first home, a small farm on the Kuran Plains).

The stories that McIvor tells William create a sense of spatial and temporal seamlessness, in which Kuran Station is listed and located among many other parts of Australia, as an integral part of a larger whole. This sense of organic unity reflects one of the main components of McIvor’s claim to land-rights. It entails a level of respect and responsibility that goes beyond the insensitive and materialistic approach that he condemns in other farmers and landowners, an acknowledgement — in a limited way — of the merits of the Aboriginal inhabitants’ understanding of place, and a corresponding awareness of ecological connectedness.

McGahan’s prose, as a whole, tends to echo this aspect of McIvor’s narrative. Insofar as it contains frequent geographical descriptions (10; 23; 105) and lengthy passages of historical explanation, providing verbal panoramas that precisely locate William’s farm and Kuran Station in a broader context:

the Kuran Plains...occupied, William knew, the northern part of a greater region known as the Darling Downs...beyond Powell was the city of Toowoomba...beyond that again, over the mountains and down to the coast, lay the metropolis of Brisbane...Turning east meanwhile, he could see...the Hoop Mountains. (McGahan 10)

In McGahan’s text, though, the contrast between the clarity of this continual re-orientation of the reader, and his more equivocal imagery of ghosts and
apparitions, emphasizes the way that, in the unified web of story and land that McIvor tries to weave around himself and his heir, there are also rifts (or [water]holes).

*Rifts and Holes*

Some of these rifts become apparent as references to collecting, heritage and discovery are juxtaposed, in McGahan’s text, with allusions to work and production. For instance, to support his sense that the gathering of stories provides a means of establishing legitimate ownership, McIvor employs a logic that reflects an internal contradiction that is perhaps typical of “settler” communities in postcolonial Australia. The first approach involves establishing rights through tradition, loyalty and continuity (“I’ve been here all along” McGahan 294). The second aspect is the argument that the past can be wiped clean through the establishment (at any point in history) of a new beginning: the work of the “pioneer”. Curthoys observes that through the rhetoric of hardship and victimhood, “many non-indigenous Australians” who are “keenly aware of being, themselves, displaced”, have “fiercely taken on their new country as home” (Curthoys, “An Uneasy Conversation” 33).

Some of McGahan’s characters echo this sentiment. McIvor, for instance, emphasizes the value of work as a strategy for achieving legitimate possession and resents the role of a government with colonial origins which “starts taking” land and money “from those that got there first and did all the hard work” (130). Similarly, although there is a collection of stories that defines Kuran Station, William must earn this heritage, through various ordeals and rituals.

McGahan provides an example of this in his references to McIvor’s Australian Independence League (an organisation that somewhat paradoxically proclaims, under the name of the nation, its independence from national institutions), established ostensibly to protect the rights of the individual.
Mclvor’s motivations in establishing the League and its policies reflects the heterogeneity of “settler” communities, in which not only race but also divisions such as class and gender generate different ways of establishing identity. Mclvor, for instance, refuses to enlist in the Second World War, because “[h]is experiences at Kuran Station still bit deep...he had glimpsed the mother country behind [the White family’s] prejudices and arrogance...They stood for the Empire...and they had rejected him. So the Empire’s wars were no business of his” (McGahan 122-123). Mclvor’s justification of his own rights to land entails, paradoxically, a rejection of the colonial project.

Paul Carter, in his introduction to the concept of spatial history, criticises “empirical history” and its focus on the gathering of “fixed and detachable facts...durable objects” which in turn contributes to a “cult of places” (P. Carter xxi), and provided a useful basis for the possessive ambitions of “imperial history”. He casts doubt on the status of place as something which is already “passive, objectively there” (P. Carter xxi). Likewise, McGahan suggests, in The White Earth, that place is more dynamic than this and that history is not simply a matter of gathering inert facts about the past.

However, McGahan’s text also indicates that although “settler” culture is capable of incorporating such a dialectical and bilateral process, Mclvor’s justification of his claim to Kuran, however well intentioned, remains capable of underpinning the bigotry and aggression of right-wing political parties. The apparently benign process of listening to the land and collecting of stories, advocated by Mclvor, also involves a similar sense of history as linear, permitting succession and appropriation. As William observes, “[t]he black men, it seemed, had held the knowledge when they had owned the land. His uncle held it now” (McGahan 181). In various ways, though, McGahan’s imagery of nature and references to the collecting motif demonstrates that this grasp of knowledge and the land is more conflicted and less secure than William imagines.
One way that this insecurity becomes evident is through McGahan’s portrayal of the tension between Kuran House, home of his collection, and the surrounding land. Despite Kuran Station’s powerfully individual identity, so clearly visible upon the ground of the plains, and against the backdrop of the Hoop Mountains, it is not secure and whole within its matrix of story. At one point in *The White Earth*, William, succumbing to the enchanting power of McIvor’s collection of stories, imagines Kuran Station personified as a “sleeping giant”, a seemingly independent and ancient being (McGahan 117). Although the personification of the Station reflects the sense of organic unity that McIvor uses to secure his claim, McGahan’s description of the Station reveals that this is a problematic notion. As I discuss below, collecting theory offers some useful perspectives on these images of possession, particularly the uneasy relationship between the land, the house, and the collection at its ostensible centre.

The text provides much evidence that as an entity, Kuran Station is provisional and negotiable; its borders are not simply natural or given, but cultural and constructed, and its identity has to be constantly maintained. McGahan reveals that the property’s boundaries depend on wider political and economic factors, including recession, and urbanisation:

> The actual owners…the White family…took possession of the land in 1860…over three hundred thousand acres…By the declaration of Queensland’s statehood in 1901, most of the grand runs were gone…But Kuran survived…by the time John McIvor was born, Kuran Station was still almost half its original size (McGahan 25).

Moreover, the language McGahan uses emphasizes, again, the failure of the House as the station’s ostensible centre. Compared to the land, “a sleeping giant of a thing, native and alive and half wild” (McGahan 117), Kuran House itself seems less powerful in some ways than the living (if drought-stricken)
land that surrounds it. At the same time, though, McGahan’s use of the words “native” and “half wild” to describe this giant recalls the terminology of nineteenth century colonial references to indigenous peoples, and this multifaceted image evokes both the giant’s power and vulnerability — sleeping, it is vulnerable and objectified. With no possibility of agency, the giant exists — temporarily — only for the onlooker.

In the context of Susan Stewart’s comment that traditionally, in folktales for example, “the giant is linked to the earth in its most primitive, or natural, state...Giants, like dinosaurs, in their anonymous singularity always seem to be the last of their race”(Stewart 74), the image of the giant has further resonance. For instance, it evokes the rhetoric of evolution, natural selection and extinction that was often used to justify colonial policies (Reynolds “Nowhere People” 99-100); although the image does suggest the giant’s potential power; if only sleeping, it will awaken, with unknown consequences.

Stewart notes, though, that for the viewer, a gigantic form, because of its physical size (requiring distance for full visibility) and its disjuncture from the conventional matrix of scale (inducing a sense of unfamiliarity or strangeness), creates an impression of distance and transcendence in the onlooker.

Likewise, McGahan also suggests that ownership itself also produces gigantism. This aspect of ownership is reflected by William’s fantasy. Responding to an imagined command to “Grow up”, to prove himself worthy as an heir (McGahan 116), William visualizes himself literally grown larger: “he could see an image of himself as an adult, a man...Tall and assured and invulnerable.” (McGahan 117)

As William imagines inheriting not only the House but the land (the sleeping giant), his sense of his increasing size intensifies: “The sense of expansion widened, thrilling in a deep, physical way, as if ownership was something that enlarged the veins and enriched the blood” (117). The landowner (like the
collector — in fact, as a collector, in this context) is imagined as a solitary, self-possessed figure, “having learnt all the stories and secrets that there were to learn, a master of wisdom inaccessible to anyone else. The power of that!” (117). However, just as the giant may be the “last of its race”, so William’s fantasy leaves him isolated: “Alone in the House...His own House” (117).

In some ways, William’s fantasy of power and dominance, although linked to an image arising from McIvor’s policy of respect, understanding, and organic integration, reiterates an ominous pattern that often emerges in debates over national identity and belonging. Members of McIvor’s Australian Independence League, for instance, respond to the Native Title legislation by planning to organize a “militia” to “defend this country” (McGahan 189). When the League advocates violence and voices racist attitudes, McIvor protests: “This is not about Aborigines. I’ve got no problem with them, not as a race” (McGahan 212). Nevertheless, he dismisses and resists any of their claims.

McGahan’s portrayal of these events, the ultimate results of McIvor’s story-keeping, reflects a phenomenon that Jennifer Rutherford, utilising concepts from psychoanalytic criticism, identifies as a “link between aggression and a moral code...which I call the Australian Good”. She suggests that this is a “national fantasy” not limited to the “extreme right” (Rutherford, Gauche Intruder 9-10), and traces it to the way that the “good”, as a signifier, partakes of the “metonymic chain of desire. Insofar as identifying and enacting “the good” (such as, in her example, neighbourliness as an Australian value) involves simultaneously an assertion (empowerment) of subjectivity, ironically this also entails the destruction or denial of alterity and of the “neighbour within” (Rutherford, Gauche Intruder 26). Thus, the “good” cannot be isolated from associations with power and obliteration.
The collection in Kuran House also exemplifies some aspects of this fantasy. McIvor, explaining the reason for his museum room, describes it as a memorial to the lost explorer, explaining that he retrieved the relics of the explorer Alfred Kirchmeyer from obscurity because it “seemed the decent thing to do. The Whites just kept them in a bag in a cupboard somewhere” McGahan 163). As I discuss below, however, McIvor’s explanation, however, is undermined by the text’s Gothic atmosphere and imagery, which implies the possibility of more macabre, and certainly more equivocal, interpretations of his emphasis on decency and preservation.

4.5 Awful Things: Illegible Relics

One consequence of McGahan’s depiction of these relics is that, despite McIvor’s claims that he is “probably the last man alive who know the whole story” of the explorer, it emerges that this story is one of silence, muteness, and unintelligibility. For example, the few relics that remain from the explorer (“Glasses, a compass, a watch, a journal” 162) provide little information. Their effect is potentially closer to that of the “souvenirs of death” such as “the relic, the hunting trophy, and the scalp”. Such items, Stewart says, “mark the horrible transformation of meaning into materiality” (140); a transformation that, in Stewart’s examples, is associated with the total destruction of an enemy, or of prey, and thereby, the total conquest enjoyed by the victor: a conquest that comes at the cost of “an erasure of the significance of history” (140).

McIvor seems to recognize this when he comments that when the explorer’s journal was found, “it’d been out in the weather so long that nothing in it was legible. So no-one knows what he saw or discovered. An awful thing, that book upstairs” (McGahan 163). Despite his insistence that he can hear the voice of Kuran, and understand its stories, McIvor’s ambivalence about his enigmatic relics, and his recourse to designating them, almost inarticulately, as “awful
things”, seems to reflect an encounter with not only a representation of failure, but also a profound failure of representation.

Jennifer Rutherford suggests that the encounter with the awful thing may be a characteristic feature of colonial experience: “the signifier, Lacan argues, can be full only because it is empty, because it brings into being with its creation a void, a gap at the heart of the symbolic”. She comments that colonisation “provoked an unrelieved encounter with this gap”, which in “both Lacan and Freud’s writing” is “conceptualized as the Thing — an unsymbolised remainder that created in the act of symbolisation” (Rutherford, Gauche Intruder 32). It is this, Rutherford argues, that motivates “white Australia’s history of a marked aggression to alterity” (38). She argues that it underpins attempts by “settler” culture to resolve an encounter with absence represented as the rupture of the law of the Old World...we find that this gesture of resolution acts to reinstate the law of the Old World even though it acts to forge a new social contract...identified and valorised as the repudiation of the old. (Rutherford, Gauche Intruder 38)

Similarly, McIvor’s past continues to haunt him as his desire for Kuran ultimately leads him to replicate some of the rejections and exclusions that he repudiates.

For instance, McIvor dismisses or ignores the desire of others, with a disdain similar to that once shown to him by Elizabeth White. He ignores the long-time caretaker of Kuran House, Mrs Griffiths (who had remained, a “forgotten caretaker — before William’s uncle arrived and stole it from her” (McGahan 114), and later claims “that she had cooked and cleaned...for over twenty years...and was now owed compensation” (McGahan 375)). He is also contemptuous of William’s parents: “Some people are just doomed, period...people like your parents, sometimes they hunger for a piece of land, because they’ve never had anything of their own before” (McGahan 108)).
devotion to reclaiming Kuran Station also comes at the cost of his daughter’s and wife’s welfare (“Harriet was appalled to discover...a man so cold and calculating that his main concern wasn’t for his daughter’s safety...but for property and money and a crumbling old homestead” McGahan 223).

In his reaction to the vast, undifferentiated and sea-like openness of the Kuran plains (“a flat and featureless world, a great empty space beneath a wide sky” (McGahan 97), McIvor reiterates a trope that Jennifer Rutherford refers to as the “‘Great Australian Emptiness’”; a “metaphor derived from a traumatic encounter with symbolic failure” (Rutherford, Gauche Intruder 31). His responsiveness to the sensory and topographical richness of the Hoop Mountains (and later, of Kuran itself) “where sound [seemed] so three dimensional, so crisp, and so suggestive...a world of secrets...[n]ew vistas, new perspectives”, indicates, perhaps, an evasion rather than a resolution of the “empty” centre. This symbolic failure is exemplified in practical terms by the failure of William’s father’s farm, but also by McIvor’s museum of relics, insofar as the collection in Kuran House represents an effort to contain history and to hold place securely.

It is notable that each object in McIvor’s private museum has lost its crucial functionality — which is also its ability to represent or aid comprehension: “an old pair of spectacle frames, without any lenses...a tarnished metal compass, with a broken needle...a fob watch...the face missing...most unsettling of all...a single boot, tattered, torn and rotted” (154). In a context where to “walk the hills” (McGahan 117) is a sign of power and ownership and a means to knowledge, a single boot is particularly disabling. Carter argues that it is important to consider place in terms of “the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence” rather than simply as “an empty interval, a natural given”. He notes that in “explorers’ journals”, it is possible to “discern the process of transforming space into place, the intentional world of the texts” (P. Carter xxiii). Walking the hills, from this
perspective, is not a matter of crossing or patrolling a place, but “creating” it. Similarly, Genoni (14) comments that, in the explorer’s journal, the act of exploration was transformed into a text which sought to recreate the experience of both “the travelling and the land that was travelled” (Genoni 14). In The White Earth, though, the illegible journal is like the supposedly blank heart of Australia: a void.

In retaining the mute objects as heirlooms, McIvor tries to ensure their communicability, without which, he admits, the explorer’s discoveries — and identity — seem worthless, but in doing so, he is forced to confront his inability to contain or control their meaning. When he is summoned to his great uncle after being discovered in the forbidden room, William asks him if the relics have “always” been concealed there (McGahan 163). Although William’s question presumably refers only to the era before his great-uncle’s ownership of the property, it can — especially because of the use of the word “always” — perhaps be read as suggesting that the disturbingly useless, yet compelling objects represent a more profound and permanent problem: McIvor’s unsuccessful struggle to close the “gap” between signifier and signified.

Even McIvor’s and William’s fantasies of a personified Kuran Station may reflect this situation, as both Benjaminian and psychoanalytic collecting theory suggest. For instance, McIvor, and for a while, William (under the influence of a relic, the police hat), become obsessed with the Station. Unable to understand the voices associated with the speaking or sleeping giant, they resort to a form of fetishism. Fetishism has a range of meanings and associations, but one of its properties, according to Graham Huggan (18), involves “substituting a spiritual presence for a physical absence”. It drives (perhaps to extremes) “narratives of desire” and “containment”.
The museum-shrine is a risky place, where highly personal and idiosyncratic elements threaten intelligibility, but retain a compelling power. McIvor’s implicit devotion to his unintelligible relics is especially redolent of the fetish, an effect that is enhanced by the bodily imagery McGahan uses to describe the room. Each of the relics in McIvor’s museum-room is kept in segregation, isolated from context, in a “glass-fronted cabinet. It contained five shelves, but each shelf held only a single object” (McGahan 154). McIvor’s collection is compared to a shrine or “chapel”, a place (unlike the ruined station church) where William can imagine his uncle “bowing down” or worshipping: “A brief image came to William of his uncle bowed before the objects” (McGahan 154). These images of relics, along with many of the other collecting examples in McGahan’s novel, serve to draw attention to the limitations of “settler” society’s strategies of possession. I will argue, in the remainder of this chapter, that collecting motifs in McGahan’s text also have other characteristics and functions.

In Marxist theory, for instance, collectors often fall prey to the spell of the commodity fetish, but to Walter Benjamin, collecting offered a way of breaking this enchantment, through its own form of magic (or entrance-ment), the dialectical image. According to Susan Buck-Morss, in her analysis of Benjamin’s enigmatic example of collecting, the Arcades Project, the concepts of “nature” and “history” exemplified this situation: "Benjamin identifies only what is new in history as prehistoric. The conception is dialectical. There is no biological or ontological "primitiveness" that defies historical transformation" (Buck-Morss 70). As I have mentioned, Benjamin believed that the collecting of cultural detritus entailed juxtapositions and ruptures that revealed the contingency of concepts, and thus had value as a radical form of historical understanding. I suggest that, in The White Earth, McGahan’s allusions to collecting, while not necessarily involving dialectical images in the Benjaminian
sense, does unsettle the foundations of the concepts of nature and history that are often used to support claims to place and identity in Australia.

4.6 Nature, History and Haunted Relics

The ghostly encounters triggered by William’s discovery of McIvor’s collection, and by William’s own collecting of stories, add an important dimension to McGahan’s overall representation of materiality. I return to Emily Potter’s analysis of McGahan’s text to suggest that his depiction of collecting invokes the natural, the cultural and the supernatural in ways that exemplify the “dynamic, processual, and non-linear” poetics outlined by Potter, while also revealing the (necessary) instability of the concepts on which this post-colonial poetics depends.

The “ecological poetics” that Potter recommends, and finds in McGahan’s novel, is in direct opposition to the organicist imagery which, some critics point out, “has been such a mainstay of right-wing rhetoric” (Soper 123), and is apparent also in some of the claims to identity and possession outlined in McGahan’s novel. Potter contends that, to many of McGahan’s characters, the existence of relics and ruins such as Kuran House serves only to exemplify “the linearity embedded in Western concepts of time”, permitting a faith in “foundations” and in the authority of a similarly linear, univocal “authoritative narrative” of history (178). This understanding of time has, she argues, underpinned non-Aboriginals’ attempts to establish their own connections with place, and to dismiss indigenous claims — and, ironically, informs the Native Title Act itself.

Likewise, despite the relatively empathetic understanding of place and attentiveness to history that is practiced by McIvor — an approach that is seemingly rewarded by his prosperity and success as a pastoralist — his attitude reflects, Potter observes, a model of “nature” as organic unity, which, she argues, contradicts more recent thinking about ecology. Ecology, to Potter,
incorporates “proximity”, “uncertainty”, and “cross-pollination” (Potter 177). In McGahan’s novel, she contends, the past is not “distant”, but emerges as “proximate” in unpredictable ways. She maintains that McGahan’s text reveals a “poetics of memory” that may be read according to an ecological analogy, “inspired by proximity rather than distance and uncertainty rather than assurance” (Potter 177).

Ecological poetics, according to Potter, provides a model of space-time relations in which each is haunted by the other. As she points out, materiality in *The White Earth* can be read in terms of what she calls “contamination”. She notes that the motif of contamination may be traced through McGahan’s text in various ways, beginning with his apocalyptic images of mushroom clouds of smoke, which Potter associates with radiation, a metaphor for the unpredictable but ongoing effects of the past and the way that the “repressed — with its attendant possible knowledges — always returns” (179).

This is exemplified by the re-awakening of the relics in McIvor’s collection, as McGahan’s plot follows the pattern of what Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver have called “one of the Gothic’s most fascinating structural logics, the return of the repressed...murder victims are returned from the dead, secrets are revealed and past horrors are experienced all over again” (Gelder and Weaver 9). The “supernatural” element in McGahan’s text provides, as Potter suggests, support for the idea that “the workings of time do not enable a past to be cleaved straightforwardly from the present” (Potter 177). This haunted quality exemplifies, as she claims, the “temporal...contamination” that chronological history suppresses, but is one of ecology’s characteristics.

*Interference*

The uncanny effects of the collecting motif emerge in several ways in McGahan’s text. For instance, the ghostliness associated with the relics, and with collecting, may be read in two ways: as “really” supernatural or else a
symptom of the disease that causes William’s hallucinations. That this remains unresolved in the text, is, as Potter notes, further evidence of McGahan’s acknowledgment of the world’s state of “mutual infection” (Bennett qtd in Potter 180).

McGahan’s allusions to the collection’s haunted and uncontainable dimensions also foreshadow Mclvor’s eventual failure to control and escape the past by taking possession of Kuran’s stories. They also suggest that the unsettling effects of the haunting are not to be easily resolved. For example, Mclvor’s attempts to dismiss or rebut Aboriginal claims to Kuran because of a lack of “continuing presence” (a requirement of the Native Title act) ultimately fail when William’s quest-like expedition to Mclvor’s sacred centre, the Kuran waterhole, reveals the remains of the massacre committed by Mclvor’s father. The bones are the missing piece that completes a story that overlaps and undermines Mclvor’s narratives of place and identity, but even his attempted destruction of this material evidence ignites the fire that also destroys Kuran House and Mclvor.

This situation is paralleled by William’s experiences of the haunted and haunting relics. When, long after his illicit visit to the museum, William “sees” Mclvor’s relics again, it is during his quest to reach Kuran’s secret waterhole. He is followed by visions of the explorer-ghost, now complete with all its equipment, including the relics from the museum. Although in this encounter the relics are restored in ghostly manner to their original owner and function, even here they seem to be almost incomprehensible, because of their excessiveness — “a multitude of items — water bottles, satchels, watches, tin cups, notebooks, an impossible array” (McGahan 310) — a futile piling-up against loss and disorientation. Likewise, Mclvor’s museum of relics is, in part, an attempt to secure the explorer’s memory as a foundational moment for the possession of Kuran, but his attempt is a fruitless battle against the explorer’s own tardiness or belatedness in taking his place in the process of settlement,
and, particularly, against the illegibility of his journal. The explorer-relics, as tools for orientation and observation, are excessive and useless. However, as a disruptive influence, they retain a haunting power.

When William is allowed to keep the police-hat that he finds in a trunk of relics, the wearing of this hat (formerly owned by McIvor’s father) acts as a catalyst, activating ghostly apparitions associated with the relics, and revealing that the collection is both constituted and exceeded by other presences, absences, and exclusions; by ghostly voices and audible silences. It is notable that as he takes possession of the hat, his earache — an injury caused by his own mother — returns, and the effects of this act of violence also linger, inducing the infection which may or may not be responsible for the apparitions that William sees, such as the bunyip:

“[u]nderstanding shook William...The creature did not speak, it was a sound only in the mind, the crack of old stone, the groan of timber in the wind...[William’s] hand lifted, and his fingers touched the badge of his captain’s hat”. (McGahan 316-317)

The ghostly disturbances associated with collecting in *The White Earth* are not confined to material relics. For instance, while William is acquiring his heritage of stories from his great uncle, he also gleans scraps of other, dissenting stories. The juxtaposition of these stories (from news reports, from his cousin Ruth, from the park ranger, from the ghosts) is partly responsible for William’s growing doubts about his great-uncle’s ambitions: in this case, collecting creates “interference”, akin to the ghostly “static” he often hears or sees on the radio or television. As both a collector and heir to a collection, William discovers that meaning may not be delimited and confined by glass cases, or by the “material presence” or absence of people, artefacts, or places. As Potter (181) notes, in the “postcolonial nation...presences and knowledges jostle and co-exist, shifting and bending about each other”.
Potter’s “ecological” reading of *The White Earth* responds to specific motifs in McGahan’s novel, but she also suggests that ecopoetics (as a way of understanding temporality, materiality, place, and history) has a wider application as a way of understanding and “renovating” discourse about national identity and history. I suggest that, McGahan’s portrayal of collecting, particularly in the context of his text’s Gothic tropes, not only embodies Potter’s ecopoetics but, in doing so, also offers many instances where the foundation of this poetics is itself unsettled.

Potter’s concept of ecopoetics concurs with American literary critic Dana Phillips’ discussion of the role of ecological metaphors and analogies in literary criticism. Phillips observes that current ideas about ecology no longer stress the equilibrium, indivisibility and total interconnectedness of ecosystems, but instead emphasize their discontinuities and provisional aspects (581). However, even in this less holistic and universal context, ecology still tends to be a far more comprehensive concept than its predecessors, such as “natural history”, and it could perhaps be argued that it also transcends or collapses traditional Western distinctions between “nature” and “culture”.

For instance, Potter includes “the interactivity of human and non-human material forms” and even the supernatural, in her definition of an “ecological poetics of memory” (177). In spite of the evident challenges of defining ecology, she still finds it advantageous to use the term. One reason may be that “ecology” retains strong associations with non-human “nature” in the traditional, dualistic sense. Because of this, the term “ecology” perhaps gains some of its appeal from an implication that it refers to the real, “natural” state of things.

Her ecopoetics sometimes seems to be much more than an analogy or a model: she asks, for instance, whether anything “can anything be excluded from an ecological milieu?” (Potter 180). Consequently, it would seem that —
because of the capacity of her concept of “ecology” to absorb and account for inconsistencies and irresolution — ecopoetics is, to some extent, defined by a binary opposition that gives it a foundational status. In an ecological system, though, where “assemblages of matter and energy constantly shift and recombine in an endless and unpredictable flow” (Potter 180) there is no secure vantage or reference point, and even “nature” and “culture” themselves are implicated in this — as becomes evident through various aspects of McGahan’s use of collecting motifs.

Staging

Potter contrasts her vision of ecological poetics with “chronology”; a form of “temporal understanding” which she claims is embodied by “the Western museum”, a place of “staging” and “[t]heatricality” (178). Museums, as the homes of collections, are also exemplary as the home of the “material presence” which, Potter argues, underpins a “culture of linearity and its resultant distancing of the past” (179). Referring to Paul Carter’s comment that “imperial history” is an illusion sustained by a “theatre of its own design” where “history’s drama unfolds” and the historian is assumed to be simply “repeating what happened” (P. Carter xv), Potter argues that “Theatricality allows for an imagined unity of the stage, or the ground, on which the colonizer stands, and the imposition of authoritative narrative” (Potter 178).

In the museum, history is represented as both spectacle – a place of unity and simultaneity – and chronology – a sequential arrangement of relics. The rhetorical techniques underpinning the museum collection, extended to other forms of historical representation, camouflage the fact that an apparently “natural”, independently existing historical event may in fact be an effect of a cultural operation. Therefore, chronological history is not “natural” or “foundational”; it just appears so through convention — a convention that, Potter argues, is subverted by McGahan’s use of ecological motifs and logic in
The White Earth. However, Potter’s apparent privileging of an ecological model of time and space over chronological history depends on an example that figures the latter as cultural, setting the artifice, the static, tableau-like theatricality, of the museum and its collection against the mobility and the biological (botanical) connotations of ecological “cross-pollination”.

Some of McGahan’s allusions to collecting contribute to overturning binary relationships between nature and culture, and to revealing the instability of any displacement or reversal of hierarchies. For instance, the items within public museums participate in a communal, social environment; they signify and represent, as much as embody, the world from which they are collected. In most respects, collecting is very much a cultural activity, and as such, its function is to naturalize the categories and identities that emerge within the collection — including the concept of nature.

The private, family-based “museum” or collection, like McIvor’s, although also informed by the discourses of the public museum, has slightly different functions and implications, which perhaps highlight the provisional quality of the museum’s cultural status. In particular, the private collection utilizes the concept of the fetish. To many theorists, such as Baudrillard (9), fetishism is a form of obsession that has overtones of sexual perversion: it confirms suspicions that collecting is not simply a cultural (i.e. not natural) activity, but actually an “unnatural” and “unhealthy” occupation: nature gone wrong.

In The White Earth, these allusions to the diseased and unnatural are reinforced by McGahan’s description of the museum room as a shrine which has wrongfully supplanted the station chapel, an abandoned (and “diseased”) building when William finds it: “its weatherboard walls were actually a scabrous grey...The front steps were broken, and the doors were padlocked shut” (McGahan 65). Consequently, McGahan’s imagery briefly positions nature as (by implication) something potentially pure and uncontaminated.
McGahan emphasizes the suspect status of Mclvor’s museum, and its links with Mclvor’s attempt to contain, control and reify or “naturalize” place and history, in various ways throughout the text, but in this instance, he does so by borrowing from the very concept (nature as pristine; an origin for the speech which legitimizes Mclvor’s ownership) he destabilizes elsewhere.

McGahan’s depiction of the relationship between storytelling and collecting reveals a similar oscillation of binaries. Narrative, normally regarded as a linguistic, cultural phenomenon, has particular importance in The White Earth because it is a birthright; stories are natal and natural, spoken by the land, constituting the land. However, the natural process of inheriting a collection of stories crosses over again into culture, when, in the context of “settler” discourse, Mclvor insists to William that belonging has to be earned. Nature, or birthright, is not enough after all, and William realizes that he must “show his uncle he was worthy” (McGahan 117).

One of the first stories l/earned by William, from Mclvor’s collection, is about a bunyip — a story told to Mclvor by an old man:

...one of the first to climb those hills...he hunted an animal up there that he had never seen before...it bellowed in the night...Huge and shaggy and wet, he said it was, with a stink like old mud. And a great head with wild, white eyes (McGahan 59).

Ken Gelder, in The Postcolonial Uncanny, refers to a very similar creature that appears in a story told by Percy Mumbulla in 1958, who describes a “bunyip...It had a terrible big bull-head and it was milk-white”. The bunyip, Gelder suggests, is “metaphorically connected to cattle, those very creatures that signify the dispossession of Aboriginal people....And yet a creature which is so animated by colonisation is nevertheless, initially at least, shown to contribute to Aboriginal empowerment”. Gelder notes that the bunyip story creates an “unsettling” effect through its double signification of the “primitive” and the “postcolonial” (Gelder 35).
In the context of McGahan’s text, perhaps the bunyip story also gains unsettling power from the way that it highlights yet another example of the unstable relationships between nature and culture. As something linked closely to its environment, as a spirit of place, encountered only by a privileged few, the bunyip is associated with the supernatural, but as a sort of intensified nature; an encounter with it is an encounter with the authentic being of place. Yet as a supernatural or spirit being, it is also mythical and cultural, known through narrative in the form of anecdote, allusion, hearsay and rumour; and much of its frightening yet attractive power as a signifier of nature is derived from this deferral.

I suggest that the Gothic qualities of the collecting allusions in *The White Earth* also reinforce this oscillation between nature and culture (and associated sense of unsettledness) in other aspects of McGahan’s own narrative. Despite its melodramatic elements, its affiliations with the tenets of ecopoetics, and its theatrical aspects, McGahan’s prose in *The White Earth* is often inclined to be stolid, unadventurous, and relatively conventional in form. Although the narrative alternates between the perspectives of William and McIvor, and between two different eras, the text does not embody the principles of fragmentation, dissonance, and diversity that its themes might suggest. For instance, McGahan’s extensive (sometimes to the point of being intrusive) passages of historical and geographical explication, provides the reader with ample orientation and potentially a sense of closure that perhaps undermines the inconclusive aspects of the text which were identified by Potter. The unifying function of the apparently reliable narrative voice, gathering or collecting the various threads of the plot and themes, has a similar effect.

Nevertheless, along with his frequent use of clichéd expressions, McGahan’s narrative devices (which are not only allusions to, but almost a parody of the colonial Gothic genre) do have other consequences. His text could be regarded as playing a museum-like role insofar as it might be said to “stage” the return
of an old literary genre — just as, according to Potter, the Gothic “stages” the return of the repressed. McGahan’s text, then, as a showcase for old literary relics, is also somewhat theatrical — but for the “stagy” effect of McGahan’s text to become apparent, it is necessary to invoke the real or the natural as a point of comparison. This contributes to the text’s unsettling of the notions of the real, the authentic and the natural, which underpin many claims to place and identity in Australian post-colonial society.

These effects also have implications for McGahan’s portrayal of collecting as a form of historical exploration; a trope that characterizes all the novels discussed in this thesis, but is most evident in *The White Earth*. In her outline of Canadian exploration literature, Germaine Warkentin notes that exploration writing “is often classed with ‘quest’ literature; but quests tend to have a mythic shape and a predetermined goal. In exploration writing such a goal is usually announced and may even be achieved...but the shape of the adventure itself is not predetermined” (Warkentin np). Simon Ryan, discussing Australian exploration writing, has argued that even the adventure itself, as narrative, tends to be pre-structured by literary conventions such as the picturesque, the exotic, the sublime and other tropes (Ryan 23; 73). William’s adventure, in *The White Earth*, seeking Kuran’s true history, is, likewise, structured according to conventions of literary melodrama, but, in part through McGahan’s deployment of the collecting motif in the context of the novel’s Gothic elements and imagery of nature, William’s temporal exploration seems to be a more complex and open-ended process.

McGahan’s allusions to the Gothic motifs of the haunted house and sinister artefacts at the heart of a decaying empire, along with his landscape imagery, may at times seem to hint at a redemptive resolution or the kind of settling unsettledness that Ken Gelder and David Crouch have observed in some post-colonial literature. However, I conclude that, overall, the theme and motif of collecting in McGahan’s text remains an effective strategy for problematizing
Australian history, as McGahan uses its ghostly associations and its unstable position between the [super]natural and the cultural to exposes some of the nuances, inconsistencies and complexities of Australians’ competing claims to place. It tends to support the kind of discursive “renovation” mentioned by Potter by offering alternative understandings of temporal and spatial identity, while also acting as an insistent reminder that the ecological “foundation” of Potter’s model and of McGahan’s own poetics also involves a form of vigilance, insofar as it is something that continually opens itself to question.

In this and the preceding chapters, I have noted some of the ways that collecting’s ghostly associations and its unstable position between the [super]natural and the cultural not only suggest that the past remains uncomfortably close, but also expose some of the nuances, inconsistencies and complexities of Australians’ competing claims to place, including the complex and difficult problem of accounting for competing experiences of attachment and belonging as well as dispossession and displacement. In the following chapters, I will focus more closely on these tropes of attachment and presence, in the context of collecting’s powers of enchantment.
PART II: Collecting and Enchantment

“my memories of these years have the character of snapshots… I see myself — from a great distance — with disbelief — as if I am a traveller in a foreign land” (Falconer 126)
5. A DISTANT COUNTRY: Collecting, Enchantment, and the Shimmering of Time and Place

Many of the concepts which inform my argument for collecting’s “entrancing” effects in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels are also relevant to Falconer’s novel, *The Service of Clouds*, and Carroll’s novel, *The Time We Have Taken*. In the previous chapters, I argued that the “entrance-ing” effects of the collecting motif in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels resulted from its association with the uncanny, in the context of tropes of hauntedness and ghosts which had both a thematic and structural importance in these texts. In this chapter, however, I discuss the way that the collecting motif, in *The Service of Clouds* and *The Time We Have Taken*, often conveys an enchantment with material presence. I explain how material presence and proximity have a range of implications in post-colonial and historical discourse, and suggest that the use of the collecting motif in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels emphasizes that a sense of enchantment with material presence may also entail a sense of the uncanny, in the form of a “shimmering” of metaphors of distance and proximity, which, in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, aids in both producing and unsettling moments of historical visibility.

5.1 Enchantment, Proximity, Presence, and the Past in Post-Colonial Discourse

The critic Russell Belk, in his introduction to an anthology of essays on collecting, observes that the “vocabulary of enchantment and magic is rife in collector descriptions of the allure of their collections and collecting activities” (14). For many people, the enchanting power of collecting also brings the past to life through sensory and intuitive engagement with its relics: history lives in the intimacy of little objects, transmitted fragments, tactile materiality, things
that can be held in the hand, and if the past is to be meaningful, it requires presence (at sites) and proximity (to objects).

Collecting’s enchanting potentialities may be realized through its connections with complexity and diversity, either as an exemplar of such diversity, or through an ambitious attempt to simplify, classify or reduce it. The materiality of collectables — their existence as things or objects — singed fragments, treasured souvenirs, debris, and annotated or archived evidence — is also a powerful potential source of enchantment. Affirmations of contact, proximity and presence as a basis for historical knowledge have many possible implications for collecting’s role in post-colonial representations of history, although not all of these involve enchantment. Below, I outline some of the problems and potentialities of these affirmations of presence in historical discourse. I then consider how collecting, as a vehicle for enchantment with materiality, can respond to this situation, and how this response is exemplified by at least two of the novels discussed in this thesis.

The power and influence of the past — whether it is nostalgically desired, or reviled; whether it is imagined as a warning, a lesson, an ever-present source of obligation, a burden, or even an irrelevance — is dependent, in part, on the metaphor of the past’s distance or its proximity. Nevertheless, as I noted in the first section of this thesis, the idea that objective historical distance is achievable, let alone desirable, or that the past can be safely contained and isolated from the present, is often considered problematic. Post-structuralist theory, for instance, is equally suspicious of the privileging of proximity and the metaphysics of presence that often accompanies the rhetoric of historical distance and historical proximity. In writing influenced by this theory, the authenticity, origin and authority of the (historical) narrative/narrator/author is often disseminated among a haunted and haunting network of intertextual relationships and traces, which confound simple oppositions of absence and presence, distance and proximity.
Post-colonial writing also tends to interrogate the rhetoric of presence. In their influential analysis of post-colonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin comment that “the conditions of post-colonial experience encouraged the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity somewhat earlier than...in contemporary European post-structuralist theory” (*Empire* 7). However, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have also noted that "cultural essentialism, which is theoretically questionable, may be adopted as a strategic political position in the struggle against imperial power" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 17). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon, reflecting on the future of postmodernist literature, including the genre she labelled historiographical metafiction, has also noted that the destabilization of identity and essence has “pragmatic limitations in actual interventionist arenas” (Hutcheon, “Postmodern Afterthoughts” 6).

The controversy that surrounded the publication of Kate Grenville’s historical novel, *The Secret River*, in 2005, provides a compelling recent illustration of one possible role for notions of presence and proximity (and of the political significance of this issue) in the context of current Australian historical and literary discourse. Grenville’s novel, featuring her own ancestors as characters, attempted to reveal the hidden brutality of European colonisation, while exploring the moral ambiguities of both the colonists’ relationships with indigenous Australians, and the novelist’s relationship with history. Her allusions to the role of collecting processes in producing historical knowledge play an important role in this exploration, and include an affirmation of the value of presence in the form of experiences of the local, particular, and concrete.

During the twentieth century, many historians invoked the regional, the local, the concrete and the particular as a way of moving beyond the grand narratives of nineteenth century historicism (and the political structures they sustained). They favoured an examination of “microhistory” or the details of
ordinary life, rather than the larger-scale political and military events that
were conventionally regarded as the primary elements of history (Burrow
509). Through these historical techniques, places and historical narratives
were increasingly recognized and represented as “multi-dimensional” rather
than “homogenous entities” (Kowalewski 182).

Grenville’s novel also involved some micro-historical techniques, and in her
commentary on her novels, including the “writing memoir”, she discusses, in
vivid, personal detail, her collecting journeys (and journals); the gathering of
material, and the ways that this material, in its concreteness (smelly, noisy,
untidy, illegible, situated, dislocated) shaped her writing and thinking.
However, she also argued that this engagement with intimate and material
details of daily experience offered a valuable alternative to the questionable
objectivity of history.

While acknowledging that there are impediments to producing a true and full
representation of the past, she contends that writing which engages with
physical proximity and presence permits an intuitive connection or
understanding of others’ experiences, which, by offering an alternative type of
truth, circumvents the difficulties of proving what really happened. Referring
to the so-called “history wars”, Grenville notoriously commented that in her
opinion “a novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this [the
debates between historians], outside the fray” (Grenville “Interview” np).
Remote from the “fray” but close to the emotional and psychological truths
and experiences of the past, fiction, according to Grenville, could offer a
unique and valuable insight into the “secret rivers” of Australia’s history.

In response, historians like Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen questioned
the worth of intuitive identification, arguing that Grenville’s approach may
provide a more affective, but not necessarily more effective, understanding of
place and history. Although they did not claim that historians could offer
authoritative truths about the past, they drew attention to the importance of emotional distance and the opportunities for verification and debate that are offered by the historian’s rigorous citation of evidence. Significantly, though, they also emphasized that Grenville’s confidence in empathy not only reduced opportunities for recognizing errors and making corrections, but also failed to allow space for difference and acknowledgement of otherness.

Nevertheless, in a contemporary Australian context, notions of the present, proximate and local continue to have significance for literary studies and post-colonial writing, and, as I will discuss later, the trope of enchantment has a role to play in this respect. In a recent (2007) essay, Lyn McCredden, responding to Ken Gelder’s critical analysis and condemnation of reactionary trends in contemporary discourse about Australian history, identity and belonging, has suggested that a similar attentiveness to experiences of the local, present and proximate has an important potential role in Australian post-colonial writing and criticism, as a way of negotiating future directions within a discourse and discipline that is both concerned with experiences of hauntedness, and is itself “haunted” and “riven” (McCredden 13-15). She asks, for instance, if "constant critique and refusal of any place to rest or belong also lose something in terms of contexts — lived experiences and expressed needs — not for the homely, but for home? ...Or is rivenness, in Gelder’s sense, the unchallengeable, unchangeable ground of [Gelder’s] critique?” (McCredden 16).

So in what ways can collecting-related experiences of materiality and presence contribute usefully to the post-colonial representation of history? In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider how, in the novels I discuss, entrance-ing potentialities may emerge from their portrayal of collecting as a site of enchantment with materiality — despite the equivocal and sometimes questionable reputation of enchantment.
Collecting’s enchanting powers may be regarded with suspicion: to be enchanted is to be bewitched, charmed, delighted, but nevertheless under a spell and disempowered. Moreover, enchantment is often associated with nostalgia and essentialism, or with a sense of meaning and/or spirituality which has arguably been lost in the [post] modern world (Bennett 4; 91; Gane 146-147), and in this respect it may seem incompatible with a productively uncanny and destabilizing postcolonial poetics.

For instance, Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s novels reflect not only the impact of historical and social dispossession in Australia’s past, but also the affective implications of both language and collecting as forms of historical representation. In emphasizing the haunting and haunted structure of desire, deferral and loss that animates signification, they often evoke melancholy rather than enchantment. They express, to varying extents, the idea that as Brian Castro, for example, has commented, “writing is not a celebratory, joyous nor a politically correct activity. It is a melancholic and mostly frightening thing” (Castro qtd in Brennan, *Castro’s Fiction* 13)). This presumably does not necessarily mean that writing cannot celebrate things, or be celebrated, but rather that good writing should acknowledge that the condition of the possibility of such celebrations is loss.

Under these circumstances, enchantment is arguably still possible. Postmodern theorists, critics and other writers, for instance, often advocate a strategy of “re-enchantment” in which enchantment arises from a sense of exhilarating and infinite incompletion, in a process which “resists and dispels the accumulation of knowledge”, through a postmodern poetics of linguistic “eroticism and seduction” and “re-mystification” (Gane 146-147). Likewise, Castro affirms the pleasure, delight, and seductive effect of the text (“How much more enjoyment and bliss do we take away from...readings when we are wired linguistically! ...the richness...in a great work of literature...[its] layered polyphony is almost carnal” (Castro, “Making Oneself Foreign” 13)).
Nevertheless, even this type of post-modern enchantment with diversity, complexity, and semantic fecundity has been criticized for a number of reasons. The literary critic Alan Liu, for instance, argues that an “aesthetics…of…postmodern detailism” (Liu 78) and associated “post-modern” rhetoric (such as textuality or hybridity, or “particularism, localism, regionalism” may be no guarantee of avoiding a reversion to foundations and absolutes. He suggests that these terms are, “in words borrowed from Clifford Geertz… “[…] products of a certain cast of thought, one rather entranced with the diversity of things” (78), and that it “appears foundational (despite the method’s avowed…antifoundationalism)” (Liu 77). From a very different perspective, other theorists and critics, particularly Lyn McCredden and her colleagues, argue (as I have noted earlier in this thesis) that enchantment with is not necessarily adequate. They suggest that enchantment with presence (as well as enchantment with “rivenness and “restlessness”), may in certain circumstances, enhance, rather than detract from, post-colonial attempts to counteract the repressive effects of dominant discourses and institutions. Below, I consider how collecting may form part of such a strategy.

5.2 Entrance-ing Objects: Collecting, Enchanting Materiality, and Representations of Australia

In the following chapters, I argue that in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, collecting often exemplifies a form of enchantment with materiality and presence which also has “entrance-ing” potential, contributing to the shimmering of metaphors and imagery of distance and proximity through which these novels problematize both representation (signifying systems such as narrative or photographic realism) and specific representations (such as sublime wilderness or suburban dystopia). American scholar Jane Bennett’s concept of enchanted materialism and Australian critics Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden’s notion of the proximate sublime provide
two of the main inspirations for my discussion and argument in these chapters.

Lyn McCredden argues that there is a need, in Australian post-colonial discourse, to acknowledge the problems associated with notions of an “organic, authentic, local, traditional or homely identity”, and to heed the structural restlessness and “riveness and alterity” that are “favoured models of subjectivity, including national subjectivities…” She also suggests, though, that there is a need to identify other “critical discourses” which do not lapse into “complacencies or merely parochial or sentimental essentialisms or universals”; but at the same time, also acknowledge values associated with material presence and proximity, and thereby “seek to negotiate in truly dialectical terms the central national and cultural debates regarding identity and otherness…” (McCredden 16).

One response to this, McCredden proposes, is the contemporary discourse of the sacred in Australia. In recent their book on this subject, Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature, McCredden and her colleagues Bill Ashcroft and Frances Devlin-Glass argue that they have identified a specifically Australian discourse of the “sacred” as a “region of difference, transformation and empowerment” (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden 2), and that this discourse involves a transformation of the traditionally Eurocentric discourse of the sublime, through which the experiences of explorers and settler Australians, and associated narratives of Australian history, have often been framed.

The concept of the sublime can be traced to ancient Greece, but gained particular popularity in eighteenth century aesthetics, where it was influenced by the work of some contemporary philosophers, particularly Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. A sublime object is “great, fearful, noble, calculated to arouse sentiments of pride and majesty, as well as awe and terror” (“Sublime”
Although the sublime may induce terror, it has a positive aspect too: it offers an expansion of the horizons of ordinary experience, whether through empathy with the awesome extent of the sublime object, or in the effort of overcoming, through reason, its intimidating effect. Because of its associations with vastness and immensity, and the opportunities it offers to challenge or extend the usual boundaries of human capacities to perceive, conceptualize and endure, an experience of the sublime is often regarded as having a spiritual or religious dimension. Sublime effects are often attributed to mountains, wilderness, or other vast landscapes.

According to Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, allusions to materiality in Australian fiction, since the mid-twentieth century, often function, almost paradoxically, as an intimation of the intangible and “unpresentable”, by eliciting a uniquely Australian sense of the sublime (or, in their terms, the sacred), which arises from “proximate details of everyday life”, “whose material being bodies forth a presence that cannot be contained by structures of religious meaning” (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden 12), or by the “meaning culture of white Australia” (22). Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden argue that the “proximate sublime” need not necessarily involve a return to a “metaphysics of presence”, but instead offers a possible way of intimating the unpresentable (12; 28-30).

In the chapters below, I suggest that the motifs of collecting in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels often have a similar effect. They convey a sense of the sublime in the quotidian, and an enchantment with mundane material details, which is sometimes reminiscent of the delight expressed in nineteenth century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ famous poem, *Pied Beauty*. Hopkins’ poem praises the “dappled”, “plotted”, and “pieced” objects of everyday life (Hopkins 1653). The poem, critic Daniel Tiffany writes, is not just a celebration of dappled things, but of the way that dappled things are “excessive in their disclosure of what they do not possess...These ordinary things...betray the qualities of an
invisible, mutable substance that precedes them” (Tiffany 93). However, whereas Hopkins’ work was intended to enact specific theological concepts (Norton Anthology 1649), the collecting motif in The Service of Clouds and The Time We Have Taken evokes a sense of enchantment which does not necessarily entail traditional religious or metaphysical connotations.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden’s commentary on the sacred and sublime has particular relevance to Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. The Service of Clouds is a poignant reminiscence of love and loss, set in the Blue Mountains region, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The numerous forms of collecting in Falconer’s text (souvenirs, news, gossip, sites and sights, curios and samples, photographs and memories) share not only a spatial but also an epistemological context with the Blue Mountains region, in its various roles as a frontier, a sublime wilderness, and a tourist destination. Falconer’s use of collecting motifs is closely associated with her exploration of relationships between the production of these specific regional identities, and the construction of history and subjectivity. In The Time We Have Taken, Carroll also explores the role of the sublime in Australian history and traces the links and disparities between historical representations and subjective experience, through his depiction of historical changes in mid-twentieth-century Australian suburbia (the apparent antithesis to the setting of Falconer’s novel).

In various ways, the allusions to collecting in these novels both evoke and critically engage with the rhetoric of nostalgia (a desire for reunion with an imagined authentic origin, or a return to the distant country of the past), and the sublime (evoked by both temporal and spatial contexts). I suggest that insofar as collecting in these texts evokes a sense of the sublime in ordinary material objects, it does so in ways that also have much in common with the experience of a (secular) enchantment; and it invokes the uncanny in ways that are not only enchanting but also potentially “entrance-ing”.
The collecting motif, as a particular form of interaction with materiality, has the potential to evoke enchantment through its power to surprise and de-familiarise through moments of recontextualisation and fragmentation. It offers opportunities for what the political theorist Jane Bennett, in her poetics of enchanting materiality, suggests are “surprising encounter[s]” in which “the world comes alive as a collection of singularities” (Bennett 5). Similarly, in his essay “Thing Theory”, the critic Bill Brown suggests that it is possible to “look through objects to see what they disclose about history, society, nature or culture” (4), because “there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful... A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us...” (Brown 4). He observes that “[t]here are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention... occasions of contingency - the chance interruption - that disclose a physicality of things” (4). Brown suggests that when “[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects”, we realize that “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 4).

These moments of sudden recalibration of perception may provide the catalyst (surprise, wonder, a feeling of plenitude) for a sense of enchantment as defined by Jane Bennett. She acknowledges “ecospirituality” as one of her inspirations, but is careful to distinguish it from her secular, heterogeneous, and sometimes provisional view of the enchanting material world, in which she employs ideas from historical materialism, as well as aspects of phenomenology and psychoanalytic criticism, to explore the implications of the material object.

Bennett’s concept of enchanted materialism echoes Brown’s but adds the affective dimension of enchantment, which, she suggests, has ethical implications. Bennett writes, “I think of ethics as requiring both a moral code and a deliberately cultivated sensibility” (29), and she argues that “enchanted
materialism” provides a basis for “a feeling of plenitude and generosity” and joyous attachment that is important (although, arguably, not essential) for an ethical response to the world. Although she admits that enchantment is at best a tentative and conditional basis for ethics, she maintains that it is nevertheless an important and promising approach (Bennett 15).

As Bennett defines it, “To be enchanted...is to be transfixed, spellbound”, yet also, in a way, to be mobilized. Collecting material objects may also be a source of spatial and temporal adventure and exploration. For instance, the writer Susan Murphy, in her essay on place and story, describes the sense of enchantment that may arise in imaginative encounters with everyday material objects — from urban litter to historical relics. Murphy refers to the ordinary yet evocative objects, which may often be overlooked in daily life — as “knipls”, which she explains as “the Yiddish word for a little treasure you put away for a rainy day, a little nest-egg that the palm of your mind can hold” (Murphy 230; Wikipedia “Julius Knipl”). Knipls, though not necessarily historical or old, are evidently collectables, activated by a state of dreaming observation or perceptive reverie — or 5). They make it possible to “take up the street with your imagination and follow its back-ways into time” (Murphy 230).

I suggest that the examples of collecting-related enchantment in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels offer some similar opportunities, although they do not generally imply the possibility of a straightforward path to knowing the past. Rather, the mnemonic effect of their sensory qualities and the enigmatic “otherness” of their material presence create an unsettling juxtaposition or “shimmering” of meaning and mystery, and distance and proximity.

Bennett describes enchantment as a “state of wonder...a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and...a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s
default...disposition” (Bennett 5). In the next two chapters, I consider how these enchanting and uncanny attributes of collecting are emphasized in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. I discuss their entrance-ing potentialities and their relevance for the novels’ portrayal of the distant country of the past; as these texts draw attention to, and problematize, the role of certain visual and spatial concepts and metaphors in representing Australian place and history, in establishing control of territory, and, at the finer grain of everyday life, shaping subjectivity.
6. LIQUID POSSIBILITY: The Entrance-ing Transformations of Collecting in Delia Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds*

This chapter focuses on Delia Falconer’s novel, *The Service of Clouds*, as an example of the way that collecting motifs may be employed to exploit the equivocal nature of enchantment and create an effect of entrance-ment which invokes proximity and invites delight, wonder, empathy with and immersion in a particular place and time, yet also entails a judicious distance from, and critical engagement with, traditional representations of Australian history and place.

Falconer’s use of collecting motifs has two aspects. As I discuss below, she often uses allusions to collecting to reveal the discursive and material strategies which sustained the power of dominant social groups, and informed early-twentieth century representations of Australia. In later sections of this chapter, I consider how, by appropriating or reclaiming colonial tropes such as the sublime and the exotic, Falconer also uses collecting motifs to unsettle these representations. I argue that Falconer’s thematization of collecting and its enchanting powers entails a distinctive deployment of predominantly visual and tactile imagery and metaphors of proximity and distance, producing uncanny and entrance-ing effects which help to problematize and deepen her exploration of the question of what is re/presentable; what is “inside” or “outside” the frame — what can (and should) be contained, collected, and recollected.

An ambitious promise to recuperate the past is made in the first pages of this novel, in the words of the narrator, Eureka Jones: “Listen, I will make the clouds rain stories for you…I will try to revive for you this time of liquid possibility” (Falconer 5). Delia Falconer often seems close to fulfilling this storyteller’s promise, as she weaves her narrator’s vivid reminiscences into a
richly and sensuously evocative depiction of the Blue Mountains region of New South Wales, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Falconer’s novel is characterized by a complex entwining or shimmering of allusions to physical, emotional and temporal distance and proximity. This shimmering effect may be traced through the text in many ways, from the sublime and the intimate in Eureka’s unrequited love for the landscape photographer Harry Kitchings, to the details of collecting and the collecting of details in Falconer’s text.

The story unfolds through Eureka’s reminiscences of the years when, after being orphaned, she lived with her elderly aunts in Katoomba, working for local pharmacist Mr Medlicott, befriend the landscape photographer Harry Kitchings, and spending her days in the service of their very different collections. Piecing together scraps of evidence and memories — photographs, postcards, and other fragments — Eureka recalls her early experiences of love, loss and social invisibility, and reassesses them in the broader context of the processes through which historical and geographical representation, power, and subjectivity are interlinked. In the following section, I consider some of the connections that Falconer traces between the collecting activities she portrays, and these processes of historical representation and dispossession.

6.1 The Failure to be Seen: Historical and Social Visibility, and the Role of Collecting

The Blue Mountains region, separating Sydney and coastal New South Wales from inland Australia, is (often literally) a textbook example of the ways that people claim ownership of country. According to the critic Siobhan Lavelle in her essay on Blue Mountains placemaking, “A Respectable Mythology”, and historian Julia Horne, in her book on the development of Blue Mountains tourism, The Pursuit of Wonder, the region has particular significance in the history of British occupation and exploration of Australia, initially as the route of the first expeditions to the pastoral inland, and later as a holiday resort...
which, through its climate and topography, provided opportunities to promote a distinctive Australian identity which nevertheless conformed comfortably to a framework of European aesthetic and philosophical traditions.

In the sometimes-discordant mixture of ideas that shaped the region’s identity, the “romantic triumphal myth” of conquest (Lavelle 130) mingled with the aesthetic concepts of the sublime and of its humbler counterparts, the picturesque and the exotic, as well as with references to nineteenth century narratives of scientific, technological and social progress. In The Service of Clouds, many of these factors inform the characters’ collecting activities, including Harry’s own pursuit of images of God in sublime cloudscapes, the obsessive documenting of historical events by Harry Kitchings’ photographer uncle, the macabre collection of scientific curiosities maintained by local pharmacist Mr Medlicott, and the tourists’ trophy-hunting and souveniring.

Many of these collecting activities, as Falconer shows, form part of rhetorical strategies and representations of place and history that invoke exploration, national pride, health, and purity, but subtly exclude or suppress alternative or dissenting visions and voices. In The Service of Clouds, those at particular risk of failing to be seen include women, the urban poor, the indigenous inhabitants of Katoomba, the old-fashioned or out-of-date, and the ill, and Falconer’s protagonist Eureka (an orphan, a female, and eventually a “spinster”) and her mother (initially an obedient wife and finally a rebellious but a financially dependent widow) are themselves soon counted among the invisible and overlooked member of Katoomba society.

Collecting is notorious for its role in nineteenth century scientific and popular culture, where scientific principles often functioned as a form of social control and exclusion. As historian, anthropologist and curator Elizabeth Edwards observes in Raw Histories, her study of the relationship between photography
and history, “in nineteenth-century anthropological photography...carried moral value...in this context photographs become symbolic structures, reifying culturally-formed images as observed realities, rendering the latter as visible ‘objects’ in space” (Edwards 8).

There is, similarly, a hint in Falconer’s text that demands for social hygiene and control, at a deeper level, may inform the scientific principles of the tuberculosis sanatoria that were established in the mountains. Despite having a significant physical presence in the local landscape (leaving traces at the local landmark, “Expectoration Corner” (Falconer 96), the patients who are sent to the mountains in search of a cure are nevertheless also hidden in the mists, gathered and disposed of in the sanatorium, on the edge of the “abyss” in a landscape that conceals and isolates them from the mainstream of Australia (Falconer 22).

Similar examples abound in Falconer’s text. For instance, one of Falconer’s characters, Lady Harding, is the wealthy patron of a local charity (the Fresh Air League). Along with her friends — arbiters of social status and taste in Katoomba — she “curates” a collection of disadvantaged women and children from urban areas. Her group collects the urban poor for mountain holidays, gathering and selecting applications for assistance from “a box of children and a box of women” (Falconer 48) and subjecting them to collecting processes that dispose of them either by exclusion or by control: “[t]hen the box of women was opened and the consumptive, battered and exhausted were graded and assessed, to be granted or denied their moment in the clouds” (Falconer 49). Although they “need to import the children to the mountains in order to convince themselves that the air is fresh” (Falconer 47) the poor are regarded as a potentially contaminating element, and accordingly restricted in number and type, as the curative reputation of Katoomba’s air is challenged by this risky, almost transgressive collection.
In *The Service of Clouds*, the Aboriginal inhabitants of Katoomba are included among the historically overlooked groups, but in this case, it is their absence from any collection that is significant. The only exception occurs when they are included briefly, with an implicit empathy, among Eureka’s collection of observations, but even here, they are already almost invisible: “Strange that my aunts could see spirits but passed without a glance by dark faces in the streets around the Family Hotel” (Falconer 54). This near-invisibility continues throughout *The Service of Clouds*. It is a less conspicuous or challenging absence than the persistent refusal of detail in Jillian Watkinson’s deliberately oblique references to the “Gorge people” in *The Hanging Tree*, although understandable, perhaps, given the limitations of Falconer’s chosen narrative viewpoint and the scope of her plot. As a thriving tourist resort, the Katoomba that Eureka remembers was already entering the Romantic field of vision (soon to be framed definitively by the landscape photography of Harry Kitchings) wherein, as sociologist Desmond Bell observes,

> [t]he romantic gaze, as well as sustaining the self-image of the bourgeois subject as individual alone before nature, has also in its obliteration of the material culture of the native served to legitimize imperialist projects of appropriation. (Bell 20)

The two main forms of collecting in *The Service of Clouds* are the tourism-related activities of photography and souvenir-hunting. Falconer portrays these collecting activities (and associated concepts such as the “exotic” and the “sublime”) in ways that highlight their grounding in the same discourses from which “visibility”, “distance” (and, conversely but not inconsistently, “presence” or “proximity”) have emerged as metaphors for authoritative modes of historical knowledge.

As Falconer reveals, the relationship between the souvenir or curio collection and its “cabinet” has much in common with the relationship between the camera’s framing lens, and the photographic subject — and with the project of
framing the story of the past. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider some of these similarities, and then discuss how Falconer’s text also conveys the specific and entrance-ing qualities which inform collecting’s distinctive contributions to historical representation. Below, I discuss the way that photography, a central motif of Falconer’s text, overlaps with collecting and — as ways of holding the gaze and making the past visible — may be implicated in the fate of the historically overlooked.

6.2 A Convenient Symmetry: Photography, Representation and Possession

Although not synonymous with collecting, photography intersects with collecting, including souvenir-collecting, in many ways. For a start, photographs are often the subject of collecting: photographs enter the realm of collecting as part of public collections and exhibitions, or as private souvenirs, like the “silver fossils” in Eureka’s cabin trunk (Falconer 4). Links to collecting may also be traced through the ways that photographic imagery creates collecting-related effects of accumulation, transformation, or repetition, and draws attention to the complex relationships between subject and background (or frame and framed, container and contained).

Falconer’s text reflects many aspects of the complexity and ambiguity which makes photographs such powerful exemplars of collecting as an enchanting and entrance-ing mode of engaging with the past. Elizabeth Edwards observes that photographs may — broadly speaking — be thought of and dealt with as “empirical, evidential inscriptions” (Edwards 2); as “signifiers of social forces and relations”, or explored and confronted individually as “specific photographic experiences” (Edwards 3). As I discuss below, Falconer subtly explores the interplay between these aspects of photography and photographic collecting through allusions to a variety of collecting and photographic practices.
One feature that photography shares with other forms of collecting is that it often appears to involve the relatively simple act of finding and gathering (or recording) something that is already there for the taking (or observation). Collecting seems ideally placed to provide a form of closeness to the past — as an embodied, concrete, tangible presence in the case of artefacts, or as an authentic re-production in the form of textual citations or quotations. Similarly, photography seems capable of achieving an authenticity that, arguably, other forms of historical representation may fail to achieve, insofar as it appears to guarantee the past’s proximity. In an apparent paradox, though, the element of distance emerges as an important metaphor for this purpose.

Once framed or enclosed, the collectable or owned item becomes symbolically proximate, as an extension of the owner, even if physically distant. The two characteristics of collecting seem contradictory (how can collecting create a sense of “distance” through “proximity”? ) but both the metaphorical function and the concrete (or symbolic) experience of the collectable’s “distance” and “proximity” tend to stem from the same underlying assumption, by the collector, of a position of absolute externality, either physically, or in terms of intellectual transcendence. As Tom Griffiths comments in his discussion of anthropological and other collecting practices and their role in nineteenth-century Western political and scientific discourse, collecting may be regarded as “a form of ventriloquism that imposes and demands distance” (25) — although, as I will discuss later, the novels discussed in this thesis ultimately show that collecting may have other implications as well. Nevertheless, distance has long underpinned the power and authority of photographic recording and collecting as a form of scientific and historical representation.

Photography’s apparent authority and its seductive promise of containment and control was derived from its reputation for objective distance, combined with its power to achieve an unprecedented likeness (and hence closeness or
proximity). The camera is a form of eyewitness, and in Western traditions, the term “eyewitness” implies credibility — whereas “hearsay”, for instance, is usually unreliable — perhaps partly because of an association with factors such as the ephemerality of sound, or the potentially confusing effects of “polyphony” (Sui 326). In contrast, visuality is probably more readily associated with comprehensiveness, and, hence, comprehension.

Sight, of course, has a physical basis, but this bodily origin tends to be obscured by its reliance (in contrast to touch) on distance or separation rather than proximity. This separation emphasizes the difference between subject and object, watcher and watched, and readily enables a sense of the centrality and detachment of the spectator. There are various explanations for Western society’s privileging of vision, not all associated with the intrinsic qualities of each type of perception — in fact, some critics have questioned the “naturalness” of the predominance of visuality, arguing that it is part of a hierarchy of sensing which is socially organized and historically variable. As the critic Daniel Sui, in his essay on visual and aural metaphors in geographic discourse, explains, “[e]mbedded in the philosophy of vision are a set of related values that assume the existence of an objective world independent of human consciousness” (325). Comprehension may be aided by visual distance — while distance can certainly hinder all sensory perception, vision does offer the opportunity of increasing its scope (if not its resolution) with distance.

For example, it is common to draw analogies between specific examples of the visual comprehensiveness afforded by distance (such as the view from a mountain), and the more general ability to form connections, identify patterns and develop abstractions. The popularity of the panoramic view also attests to the sense of power and control that visual distance can provide. The underlying unifying possibilities of visual distance, the opportunity it affords to contain or frame and thus coalesce and essentialize, are an important feature in what Tom Griffiths (22) calls the “western vision...of development” (his
choice of metaphor here perhaps again betraying the pervasive power of ocularcentrism. The conquest of knowledge that this “vision” promised was often linked to collecting activities (especially photography) associated with colonial exploration and the conquest of people and places.

Likewise, the visually oriented technologies of photography and printing play a significant role in representing the Blue Mountains, and, in turn, these images of place, when collected as postcards, or in an album or “viewbook” (Falconer 148), support the rhetoric of conquest, whether political, economic, or personal. Even Eureka’s photographic collection allows her to possess Harry Kitchings in a way that she can never attain in real life. These instances of visual conquest or possession take many other subtle forms, as Falconer’s text indicates, and the photographic examples mirror the effects some of the other non-photographic examples of collecting in the novel. Also forms of framing, containment and control, they too are underpinned by a particular structure of metaphors of distance and proximity.

Edwards notes that the “beguiling realism of the photograph, the way that it appears “anchored to the real world...chemically inscribed” may be thought in terms of “immediacy and intimacy”, which “also suggest ‘truth’, for intimacy and truth are perceived as largely contingent on one another” (9). Paradoxically, it is this anchoring or grounding in tangible immediacy that, in Falconer’s novel, is shown to support the historically distancing effect of photographic images of the new colony of Victoria and its capital, Melbourne. The images aid the colonists’ adjustment to, and belief in, their sometimes bewilderingly new environment, in all its dazzling immediacy and physical proximity: “The new settlers queued to be photographed so they could prove to themselves they did indeed live in this town so new” (Falconer 27).

As another theorist of photography, Scott McQuire, writes, “By dint of their magnetic realism, photographs offered unique properties of symbolic
possession which translated into an ideal means of collecting and cataloguing the new world” (193). Falconer’s character Lady Harding, for instance, uses her postcard collections as social currency: “She had acquired another Switzerland and three more Germanys” (Falconer 168). The rhetoric of possession involves more than simple custody of objects, however. For instance, collecting — especially photographic collecting — has long been closely connected with racism and the marginalization of indigenous peoples, as the apparently transparent and unmediated realism of photographic technology lent authority to culturally determined interpretations and appropriations of images. Indigenous photographic subjects, for instance, could be conveniently and effectively objectified and neutralized or disposed of in ethnographic categories (although, as I will discuss later in this chapter, these images often had the potential to draw attention to the mode and conditions of their construction, something which may be increased in the context of further collecting processes (Clifford 22; Edwards 4)).

In The Service of Clouds, even the occasional failure of the new technology inadvertently furthers the effect of social elision: “the streets were full of black faces too difficultly dark to capture on a silver plate, so that ten years later no one...remembered they had been there” (Falconer 27). Gender, too, could be grounds for photographic invisibility. When Eureka attempts to retrace the history of her life’s major “disappointment”, Harry’s apparent betrayal of her love, she is forced to confront again the possibility that, as a strong-minded female, she could never be seen as a wife (Falconer 250). This invisibility is linked, albeit indirectly, to photographic collecting, when Eureka recounts — as one of many possible “beginnings” to her story — another history; that of Harry Kitchings’ “photographic madness”, its probable (genetic?) genesis and its detours through the changing technologies and photographic work of Harry’s grandfather and uncle.
Harry’s grandfather, one of Melbourne’s first photographers, is a daguerreotypist, using an early photographic technique that, in one way, differs markedly from those of his descendants: “Unable to be reproduced, no single image was the same” (Falconer 26). Falconer often describes the work of her photographer characters in terms of collecting-related imagery, and, again, allusions to distance and its unexpected associate, proximity, are important features of her description. For instance, emphasising the sensual, tactile processes of preservation and ownership required by the daguerreotype, she writes:

A photograph was something slow and tidal then, like shadows settling on a silver pool...they were toned with gold and slipped into leather pouches or bound in heavy metal frames. These were gestures suited to their preciousness. (Falconer 26)

These photographs are the collectables of a connoisseur, each item relished for uniqueness almost as much as for mimesis. However, despite these images of care and individuality, photographic collecting, with its dual elements of objective distance and intimate realism, also carried connotations of capture, enclosure and dominance that had connotations of hunting. The subjects are specimens captured and controlled in fulfilment of an aggressive desire, and resemble “furtive moths pinned by sharp shafts of sunlight” (Falconer 26). As Falconer emphasizes, in her references to Harry’s photographer grandfather, who “particularly enjoyed strapping the trembling ladies to the metal frames” (Falconer 26), this element of containment and control is particularly evident in the depiction of women, whose visibility depends on their submission.

*Photography as War: Harry’s Uncle*

Although Harry’s grandfather’s collecting activities occur mainly in his studio, and are reminiscent of the collecting of the private connoisseur, both his son and grandson are more mobile. They use new portable photographic equipment and processes that render photographs disposable and ephemeral:
“portraits...indistinguishable from one another...printed on...paper...could be reduced to pulp by a sunshower and blown along Swanston Street by the slightest breeze” (Falconer 28). Having inherited his craft from his father, Harry’s uncle builds a mobile photographic studio and sets out on the road, initially to take portrait photographs, but, increasingly, to document and capture sensational news events — to record “history”.

In this context, the collectable gains value through repetition and relational as well as individual qualities: like Harry’s grandfather, Harry’s uncle is also preoccupied with capturing images, but the act of collecting, rather than the item itself, is his obsession. During their honeymoon, “conducted without sheets and bedheads”, inside the van that is used as his travelling photographic studio, Harry’s uncle displays a sexual callousness and emotional distance towards his wife that parallels his attitude to “photography as a kind of war upon the world” (Falconer 30). For Harry’s uncle, photography becomes a voyeuristic mania, one closely linked to possession and aggression, and he “spends afternoons in hotels listening for news of...grisly murders...If there was no news he used [his wife] in a violent manner... Everything tasted of camera. He could not bear to think of the important moments happening without him all around the world” (Falconer 35).

While Harry’s uncle exemplifies collecting is association with power and control in its crudest form, Falconer also reveals that this strategy has more subtle configurations. For instance, her protagonist’s time is divided between her work for the pharmacist, Mr Medlicott, and her visits to Harry Kitchings. In these two characters, Falconer portrays very different types of collectors, contrasting the Romantic aesthetics of Harry Kitchings and his viewbooks and sacred cloudscapes with the world of Mr Medlicott and his pharmacy, where an older pharmacopoeia, in which the natural and the cultural and scientific are visibly intertwined, is giving way to a more modern approach.
Mr Medlicott’s scientific collecting practices are framed by notions of objective distance, but distance, as Falconer’s text indicates, is also associated with art and religion as much as with science; and particularly with aesthetic concepts such as the sublime and the exotic, which have strongly influenced representations of place in colonial and early-post-colonial contexts. When Eureka begins work at the pharmacy, it is suited to Romantic sensibilities, with its picturesque and exotic qualities: described as “a strange greenhouse” (Falconer 85), it is a mysterious place where “orange rind and camomile, rhubarb powder and male fern” are “suspended in bottles behind the counter like the ghosts of plants”, and the shop itself includes “leafy columns and...vases of bird of paradise pointing their dark tongues at the ceiling...and...wooden pansies with gilded edges...above the picture rails” (Falconer 86). In the shop, Mr Medlicott combines art and nature, creating “little landscapes”; making pills from the “roots and resins” of plants from “all corners of the Empire” (Falconer 98).

It is not long, however, before Mr. Medlicott, in the name of science and Progress, attempts to modernize his pharmacy — including the removal of the ornate decorations, in which art and the natural world intertwine. He protests that “he had little tolerance for the cacophony of flowers” and favours the purer scientific extracts over the “jumble which we call a poppy” (Falconer 86). In the pharmacy, the cumulative aspect of collecting gives way to another aspect: simplification and order. It elides, or naturalizes, the conjunction of art and nature that was rendered visible in the old decorations. This enthusiasm for purity also has a more sinister side, its links to power, control, and exclusion, as Eureka discovers from the anonymous letters sent to her mother’s newspaper column: “It was in this way that we learned of Mr. Medlicott’s collection of pessaries, glass syringes and prophylactics and his pamphlets full of Latin words on the perfection of the British race” (Falconer 54).
In her portrayal of many of the photographers and collectors in her novel — even Harry Kitchings — Falconer emphasizes their preoccupation with containment or control. This entails confidence in their ability to achieve proximity and presence (to close in, capture, to make present or to embody); and, simultaneously, faith in distance (which is perhaps their dominant metaphor). They are secure in their ability to step outside, to transcend and frame their quarry, or to evoke the unimaginable, the “beyond”, which is always at a distance.

However, Falconer’s text ultimately stresses that as a means of tracing the shape of history or place, photography is powerful but problematic in its reliance on the epistemological value of certain conceptions of distance and proximity; a weakness it shares with many other modes of collecting. The photograph, for example, may seem to be an exemplary source of historical evidence, but, as Eureka recalls, when her mother and aunts (three sisters) have their photograph taken at a well-known Blue Mountains landmark, the Three Sisters, its reliability is questionable (Falconer 57). Eureka remarks, of the photograph, “I cannot quite believe in its symmetry. For I was there that day...Being a fourth and inconvenient body, and not a sister, I was not allowed to pose” (Falconer 57).

In framing a view, or holding the gaze, the camera, although apparently all encompassing, actually excludes (and hence potentially marginalizes, silences, oppresses) anything that does not fit. In this respect photography shares a trait with historical narrative as it is conventionally understood, with its symmetry between story and subject, and its neat balancing of beginnings and endings — the sort of “account” that the residents of Katoomba appreciated for “its symmetry and neatness...this has always been a town which thrives on storytelling” (Falconer 59). This desire for symmetry between sign and signifier is also reflected by Harry’s uncle, who, enviously stroking his sister’s photographs of “roads strewn with cannonballs...with his fingertips...could feel
the correctness of it, the equilibrium between the gun-metal coating of the negative and its registration of the weight of death” (Falconer 34).

Harry’s uncle’s morbid fascination with the photograph reflects the way that questions about the relationship between narrative and reality, and the possibility of a teleological account of history, retain an ambiguous and sometimes oppressive presence in *The Service of Clouds*. When, for instance, on an expedition with Harry Kitchings, Eureka sees a tree, “caught by the scrub, held in the act of falling” and entangled by “creepers…tightening with sap”, she describes it as “a slow catastrophe”, noting the “sensation of contraction, the gradual gathering of force. I was unable then to understand that this was true of all disasters, or to recognize the pattern of my own” (Falconer 198). Eureka also comments, however, that she is at risk of anticipating too much:

> I am aware that my sadness has drifted into this account and insinuated itself between the lines of every page, while history does not work like this, recognising its own symptoms, heading always towards one end”. (Falconer 70)

By her own admission, Eureka’s collecting and recollecting of evidence cannot fully account for the past, and Falconer seems to suggest that, just as many possible “beginnings” (Falconer 3) present themselves, endings may also be, in some ways, provisional, plural, and incomplete.

When (in an almost uncanny moment) Eureka envisions her earlier self, it is as an impossibly remote figure: “I see myself — from a great distance — with disbelief — as if I am a traveller in a foreign land” (126). Despite the attempts by Falconer’s characters to capture or contain landscape and history through various techniques of collection and reproduction (such as printing, photography, and narrative), their goals often seem equally elusive and remote. The failure to frame or grasp patterns or to hold the gaze that Eureka registers in Harry’s work, and to some extent in her own re/collecting and
classifying, is more profound than the exclusion of the unrepresentable/disreputable that arises from aesthetic framing — the “kind ordering of details” (Falconer 113).

Its consequences may be traced beyond photography, to the issues and problems that Eureka faces as a collector of memories and observations, (whether mulling over her fragments, trying to make a whole or a set out of them or savouring their uniqueness, like a connoisseur), and to the problems of (hi)storytellers. These are issues of interpretation — framing and re-framing — and of boundaries between fantasy and reality (“It has occurred to me...that perhaps [Harry’s] whole past was my invention” Falconer 70). Overall, though, the [im]possibility of making “the clouds rain stories” (Falconer 5) is a problem of the relationship between language and the world, which re-emerges in many lights in Falconer’s depiction of various forms of collecting in the text.

_Mists, Mirages, Mountains: The Ambiguity of Historical Collecting_

In _The Service of Clouds_, as in the other novels I discuss, collecting does not always live up to its promise as a form of historical retrieval and recuperation, and collectors themselves may be complicit — often unwittingly — with various forms of oppression. However, importantly, Falconer’s portrayal and deployment of various forms of collecting and associated significations and metaphors of distance and proximity, is, as I have shown, often ambiguous and variable in its connotations.

Falconer’s text emphasizes, in many ways, the contingent and potentially unstable basis for the photographer’s images of colonial power. One example of this may be found in Falconer’s reference to the changing purposes of Harry Kitchings’ photographs, which reveal their susceptibility to the mediating and signifying effects of specific material and discursive contexts. These effects may be subversive (later, I will discuss some of the ways that, in both Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, the collecting motif is also used in ways that
more explicitly problematize the dominant stories and histories with which they are associated) although this is not necessarily the case.

For example, Harry Kitchings’ photographic viewbooks are produced to promote the sublime Blue Mountains landscape as a spiritual experience, at once intensely personal and universally available: he even gives them away, especially to soldiers posted overseas during the First World War. The photographs reveal “those white clouds of Australia”, offering an image of cleanliness and new beginnings to comfort soldiers in the trenches as “the mud of a dead Europe crunched beneath their teeth” (Falconer 252). These images of the mountains incorporate many cultural associations of distance, from remoteness to clarity, and in this context, may seem to reverse the position of Australia as a marginal former colony of Britain. However, Desmond Bell has argued that sublime imagery can have a different effect: “The bourgeois perception and representation of the countryside as picturesque idyll or sublime spectacle has served to obscure the...forms of social domination which in capitalist societies have actually shaped the land” (20). Falconer’s simile, comparing the clouds in Harry’s photos to “fleeces thrown out across the great table of the sky” (Falconer 252) is also a reminder of another subtext in which this clarity and purity actually reiterated Australia’s supportive but subordinate role, as part of the imperial economy (both financially and metaphysically).

Falconer’s text contains many reminders of the photograph’s inherent ambiguity, and consequently, many oscillations of metaphors of distance and proximity. The authority of the camera — including its fascinating quality; its ability to inspire obsession — is underwritten by the perception that the disembodied, distancing effect of technology offers, through the immediacy and proximity of the gaze of the eyewitness, an apparent solution to what Scott McQuire calls “the modern desire to annihilate distance...to reside in the enigmatic interval of the absolute instant” (McQuire 251). However, McQuire
also suggests that photography disrupts its own potential through the ambiguities of the frame/image relationship, ambiguities that thwarted efforts to annihilate distance.

Similar contradictions emerge often in The Service of Clouds. For instance, a network of metaphors that compare or connect disembodied, mechanical, photographic reproduction with Eureka’s historical eyes dominates Falconer’s text: “[i]nherited from my mother, they are clear and grey and prominent in my face...” (Falconer 11). Temporarily privileging embodiment and presence, Falconer sometimes contrasts the naïve yet coolly clinical objectivity of Eureka’s historical gaze with the cultivated Romantic aesthetic of Harry Kitchings’ photography, although the metaphor of Eureka’s “historical eyes” is also suffused with ambiguity that reinforces the shimmering of significations attributed to distance and proximity in this text. With her “historical eyes”, Eureka gathers or collects glimpses of the unspoken, overlooked aspects of life around her, observing visual excesses, glimpses of things that (like Walter Benjamin’s collectables) are not central to the narratives of the powerful, and cannot be contained within the socially acceptable picture of life in her community. These include her own mother’s struggle to balance integrity and social survival: “In the lantern slides of my memory her recording presence is registered as a blur...the shadow of her dishonour caught in the merciless shutter of my sight” (Falconer 12).

In contrast to Eureka’s candid gaze, the photographic work of Harry Kitchings, despite his lofty ambitions, proves to have more in common with the work of his rival Mr. Fowler, who captures or collects images that seem “like a beautiful accident caught in the lens of the photographer’s desire” but in fact exclude “what really happened” (Falconer 57). Eureka muses, for instance, that “From the moment I met Harry Kitchings and began to see through the frames of his sight, I became aware of their [the mountains’] magnificence” (Falconer 3). Falling under this spell, she could...
...no longer make out those features by which I had once navigated; the rotting wallaby skins outside a shooter’s tent, the scar on a rockface of a convict’s pick, the rusted cables left by a mining company...before the town was founded. I only recognized it if I stood at the exact point where one of Harry Kitchings’ photographs was taken. (Falconer 165)

The connection between reality and the photographic image, the primacy of the eye or the camera, body and machine, proximity and distance, becomes increasingly blurred, oscillating constantly through Falconer’s imagery. As Mr Medlicott comments, the patent medicines of his youth were ‘[I]n pharmaceutical terms...all quite ordinary...But that was not the point, you see. It was the names which acted like digitalis on the heart’ (Falconer 84). The Mountaineers’ sense of place and history is also shaped by a strangely inverted logic: they build “the frames of back doors and verandahs to make the landscape match the paintings in their eyes” (Falconer 3); and import sick people to reinforce their confidence in the mountains’ healthy climate.

Eureka comments that the Blue Mountains’ famous hue fades “in part” because of the “boldness” of “new photographic processes” which seek “to capture their colour” (Falconer 5), yet she also notes that their colour is lost forever because it was never captured by any camera (Falconer 4). Eventually, even Harry’s photography itself loses its identity and powers of enchantment for the people of Katoomba. Accustomed to “thinking of the mountains through the frames of Harry Kitchings’ sight”, they do not even notice when another photographer plagiarizes Harry’s images: “when they looked at his old photographs they merely recognized the landscape. They saw no art in them at all” (Falconer 301).

Eureka’s historical gaze, which returns to her after Harry’s betrayal, seems to promise a clearer and more comprehensive picture of her times than Harry’s photography. Initially, Eureka, working as a nurse at the sanatorium, under the influence of the pragmatic scepticism and independence of Matron Coan,
welcomes the return of her historical objectivity: “At first, when she told me that I had historical eyes, I had found this an enormous comfort” (Falconer 274). However, the reliability of her historical eyes also appears doubtful at times (“It is amazing what you can see round the corners of photographs with historical eyes” (Falconer 37)), and Eureka even begins to “doubt the virtue of detachment” (Falconer 274). She eventually notices that her attempts to objectively collect and classify symptoms are self-defeating, and finds the process overwhelming:

Each day my eyes were confronted only by symptoms, proliferating...The more I tried to sort them into the patterns of that one illness, the more the patients’...eager lips and flushed enthusiasms seemed...to imitate the very force of animation. It was I, by contrast, who seemed oddly immobile. I was...numb. (Falconer 275)

As I will discuss below, this oscillation between the epistemological values of objective distance and emotional proximity also emerges in Falconer’s portrayal of Harry Kitchings’ photography and its association with various forms of collecting. In particular, she draws attention to some paradoxes within Harry’s photographic collecting and its engagement with the sublime, which echo the potentially uncanny effects of other instances of collecting-related enchantment with material presence.

*Photography as Worship: Representing the Unpresentable*

Although the Harry Kitchings (partly inspired by the real-life Blue Mountains photographer, Harry Phillips (Falconer 319)) is in some ways as much a disseminator as a collector (he freely presents his viewbooks as gifts), his work has many links to collecting, especially in its rhetorical and physical dependence on the distancing effects of framing and containment. Falconer describes Harry Kitchings’ photographic equipment, for instance, as:
tools for hunting God: a panoramic camera...a tripod; a leather satchel...rope, the same type used by Edward Whymper in his alpine scrambles...a mahogany Sanderson Tropical Reflex camera; and, much later, simply because he admired the beauty of it, an Ensign Carbine made of brass which opened like a compass in his hand. (Falconer 126-127)

Eureka recalls that she “asked him whether had had ever wondered if his Sanderson camera, with its springs and shutters, was also a kind of trap; if it also inflicted scars and wounds” (Falconer 209).

Harry Kitchings, the third generation of photographers in his family, might be also be regarded as the most extreme collector, in the sense that he attempts to contain, within the frame of his lens, not only all the world but its creator as well. When Harry moves to the Blue Mountains, it is to “test his faith” (Falconer 9) in a confrontation with the region’s sublime landscapes, where he hopes “to take photographs of God” (111) in the form of the clouds — among the most ethereal of material objects. Harry’s mission is so ambitious that, in itself, it contains suggestions of the sublime — something reflected in Eureka’s devotion to him, as she acquires “a faith which would last the length of eight blue years”:

As I watched Harry Kitchings, I noted the faint electric tremor at the corners of his lips, which moved as if the words he spoke were luminous. I thought, *If he treads on one of those glass globes buried in the snow it will not break. Instead, light will spring up from his step.* (Falconer 113)

Harry’s remote, aloof manner is (mis)read by Eureka as further confirmation of this: distance, after all, is usually an important element in sublime settings. As a writer from the Romantic era, Thomas Campbell, commented, “ ’Tis distance lends enchantment to the view, And robes the mountains in its azure hue” (Campbell qtd in Salber Phillips 439), and distance is, likewise, important in Harry’s work — as it is in most attempts to evoke the sublime. In European
writing and art, the sublime is traditionally evoked by wilderness, especially landscapes on a vast scale — most notably, perhaps, the rugged verticality and overwhelming height of Alpine landscapes. The power of the sublime landscape — remote, inaccessible, and immense in scale — was partly in its distance, both physical and metaphorical, from ordinary human experience.

Even though Harry’s photography does seem to call upon a desire for proximity and embodiment, insofar as he seeks the presence of God and (ambitiously) a material and secular form for the immaterial, it still involves an element of distance. His photographs, although taken in the service of clouds and intended to capture the sacred and eternal when compiled in his viewbooks, are also collected as souvenirs by tourists. The mountain tourists, whose collections of souvenirs (foliage, rocks, insects — and Harry’s photographs) have less exalted purposes than Harry’s photographic project, nevertheless also participate in the experience of the sublime. For these tourists, the sublime qualities of spatial vastness are best experienced through the distancing effect of photography: when re-viewing the scene of the sublime in Harry Kitchings’ plein-air portraits, they see themselves staring at the clouds, dwarfed by pitted cliffs. This made them marvel at themselves. They felt heroic and defiant” (Falconer 137). In contrast to the popular image of the intrepid adventurer experiencing a moment of direct communion with a sublime environment, the tourists’ experience is one step removed from their actual visit. To Harry, there is no irony or humour in this, perhaps because a certain distance from danger is not incompatible with the Romantic experience of the sublime.

Kant argued that experiencing the (supersensible) sublime in nature involves a sort of relinquishment by the imagination, which earns it “an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices” (Kant 120); again, a sort of stepping back or distancing process. Kant contended that appreciating the sublime required a state of “calm reflection” (Kant, *Judgement* 113).
Therefore, although “gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there” involved feelings of awe “amounting almost to terror”, these feelings were “not actual fear”, and could be experienced most effectively “when we are assured of our own safety” (Kant 121). This calm state is important because, according to Kant, imagination is not involved in an experience of the Sublime — the sublime is known through the experience of imagination’s inadequacy.

The sheer excessiveness of the sublime would seem to preclude attempts to contain or frame it. However, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden note that Harry’s photography, in the tradition of Kant, is “a metonym of the supersensibility of reason, rather than the imagination” (291). That is, everything necessary is captured by the lens (“the whole world squeezes through” (Falconer 135)) leaving nothing to the imagination. Nevertheless, Harry’s photography does diverge to some extent from the European Romantic aesthetic tradition. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden argue that despite the setting of The Service of Clouds, which reflects the aesthetic conventions of the European sublime, the novel features a particularly Australian form of the sublime. The Australian sublime invokes the horizons and horizontal space of local landscapes. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden contend that despite its Western influences, this trope ultimately offered some new directions for post-colonial discourse.

They propose that Harry and Eureka both experience the Blue Mountains in terms of the “horizontal” sublime, sensing the mountains as a plateau of vastness, while trying (in the Romantic tradition) to see “the unseeable” (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden 290). Perhaps, too (albeit more indirectly) a sense of the horizontal sublime may even be detectable in the ways that many of Falconer’s characters’ attempt to expand and extend their vision beyond the confines of the everyday, whether through visiting iconic
Blue Mountain sites, such as lookouts that offer panoramic views, or through collecting of “sights” in the form of Harry’s photographs or viewbooks.

The idea of the sublime — especially this “horizontal” version of the sublime — raises questions about the nature of representation: the “horizon traces the “edge” where no-thing — the unpresentable Subject — appears.” (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden 11). In his efforts to represent “God’s face” (Falconer 111), Harry Kitchings works on this “edge”, and in this respect Harry’s photography also, as Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden suggest, heralds an Australian transformation of this trope, which foreshadowed other investigations of indigenous manifestations of the sublime and sacred, and affirmations of the sublime (and entrance-ing) potentialities of material presence. To some extent, then, Harry’s photography is a form of representation that anticipates at least some aspects of the “entrance-ing” effects of enchantment that collecting may afford.

More examples of oscillations or shimmerings of distance and proximity are evident in Falconer’s depiction of souvenir collecting. If the concepts of framing and distancing that (to some extent) structure various forms of photographic collecting suggest one way that collecting may be involved in historical misrepresentation, then the distancing effects and intimate, proximate materiality of another form of collecting, the souvenir (with which photographic collecting may overlap), has perhaps even more profound consequences for the possibility of trying to “revive” the past (Falconer 5). In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss some of the implications of this form of collecting, and its role in Falconer’s text.

6.3 The Souvenir: A Failed Magic?

Many of the collecting activities in The Service of Clouds involve the gathering of souvenirs, from Harry Kitchings’ photographs to more esoteric items: “Postmen hauled packets filled with love and human hair. Women carried
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notebooks and pressed storms in them like flowers” (Falconer 1)). In Eureka’s narrative, too, where historical analysis overlaps with nostalgic memory and reminiscence, her recollections often resemble the activities of the “antiquarian”, who gathers historical souvenirs, as much as the type of collecting associated with the historian who seeks “design and causality’ (Stewart 143). Falconer’s text often portrays a (sometimes ambivalent) longing for other places and times which sometimes corresponds quite closely with the critic Susan Stewart’s assessment of the implications of souvenir collecting. Stewart’s particular interest in nostalgia as one of the forms of this desire, and in collecting as a manifestation of the narrative/object relationship, makes her comments especially relevant to The Service of Clouds.

In this section of the chapter, I explain the implications of Stewart’s interpretation of collecting, and also discuss various theorizations of the exotic souvenir and their role in colonial and post-colonial discourse. I note that while these ideas offer valuable insights for understanding Falconer’s portrayal of collecting’s role in the construction of various representations of history, they does not fully account for the entrance-ing effects of Falconer’s employment of collecting motifs.

According to Stewart’s interpretation, souvenirs, despite being valued for their tangible immediacy, also keep the past at a safe distance. She notes that souvenirs are of two types. One type is mass-produced (such as Harry’s viewbooks). This type relies for at least some of its significance on acts (and places) of purchase and exchange, and it is these acts and sites which produce the “subject”, through the “articulation of the self” within a social context. The other type is memorabilia, which marks significant events in the collector’s life, and in this case, “the sensual rules souvenirs of this type” (Stewart 139). “The acute sensation of the object — its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye — promises, and yet does not keep the promise of, ‘reunion’” (Stewart 139).
According to Stewart, however important the materiality of the souvenir may be — however much hope it seems to offer of reviving the past — distance, rather than proximity, is the privileged value: “The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself” (145). Whether it is a mass-produced, commercial item, or something more personal and idiosyncratic, the souvenir, according to Susan Stewart, has a “double function”: to “authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (Stewart 139). The souvenir invokes nostalgia, the desire for something past. However, “something past” is itself, by definition, something incomplete, lacking, not present. If it were present, nostalgia of course would be impossible: nostalgia desires the state of loss that enables the thinking of the desired object. Thus souveniring, according to Stewart, is the outcome of desire for desire, and therefore it involves the “cultivation of distance” (145).

Stewart finds traces of this nostalgia in “Victorian souvenirs of nature (sea shells, leaves, butterflies placed under glass) (Stewart 144))”, in the curio or exotic souvenir (Stewart 147), and in images of the Romantic picturesque; and *The Service of Clouds* is a certainly a rich repository of all the appropriate references to this type of collecting. Harry Kitchings, for instance, has a “brief passion for collecting shells” (Falconer 63) in his childhood, and another Katoomba resident, Sir Wilfrid Harding, furnishes his house with “large glass cases with honeyeaters and emerald bowerbirds which had been stuffed and rendered lifelike by the taxidermist’s art” (Falconer 43). Mr Medlicott, the pharmacist, comments that “The Mountaineers...had too much leisure...They could not enjoy an afternoon stroll, he said, without first stopping for a handful of camphor for their killing jars” (Falconer 87). He is dismayed when his customers regard his herbal remedies in the aesthetic and nostalgic light of souvenirs, rather than appreciating their instrumental or use value:

There were houses where you could not open a book without half a desiccated forest falling onto your lap...It appalled him that...
customers did not ask him how they [medicines] acted. Instead, they asked what country the plants had come from; whether they had smooth or jagged veins upon their leaves; how many seas they had crossed upon their way. (Falconer 87)

Falconer uses many of her references to souvenirs to reinforce, and perhaps even reiterate, the problems of an enchantment with the past that indulges in nostalgic desire; a condition in which absence is continually invoked but is construed as obstructive rather than productive. However, Falconer’s depiction of Mr Medlicott’s disapproval reflects her novel’s pervasive ambivalence about souvenirs and their tactile, tangible qualities. Her sensual and luxuriant prose consistently emphasizes the sensual and material aspects of collecting and recollecting. These allusions to embodiment, to the corporeal, are a rhetorical strategy in which the values and significations of embodiment fluctuate almost as elusively as the mists and mirages of the Katoomba landscape. They serve to deflate Eureka’s lyrical excesses, to convey her sometimes-bitter sense of irony, or simply to celebrate or elevate the small details of everyday life. As I will discuss later in this chapter, they also have implications that invoke but reach beyond her novel’s themes of nostalgia and desire.

*The Intimate Souvenir*

In the context of Falconer’s multi-faceted depictions of souvenir collecting, the tangible often proves, in effect, to be allied to the visible, as a mode of symbolic or actual possession. For example, Falconer conveys Eureka’s attempts to overcome a sense of historical distance by accentuating the tangible aspects of Eureka’s memories of Harry, and of her years in Katoomba: for example, Eureka’s first sighting of Harry is described in terms that are as much about touch as vision:

I first saw Harry Kitchings leaning from a basket which had been lowered over the Katoomba Falls. I saw a small, angular body in a dark
suit with its back turned away...I saw two men in the acacia scrub at the top of the cliff struggle to keep the basket steady...Below I watched a smooth hand take a folded handkerchief and gently wipe the moisture and powder from the camera lens (Falconer 9).

Harry Kitchings’ words, too, are described as emphasizing or embodying the corporeal nature of the clouds themselves — to the extent that Eureka imagines them becoming physically incorporated in his listeners: “we seemed to taste cloud in between the dainty layers of bread and cucumber we ate” (Falconer 112). This reference to the eating of bread and clouds (in which the presence of God may be felt) has religious connotations, but it is also an example of the way that Falconer’s lavish use of visual imagery is complemented by references to tactile qualities, rather than sight’s usual counterpart, sound.

Even Harry’s ethereal photographs of cloudscapes and mountain panoramas are intended to engage the body. For example, for the characters in The Service of Clouds, the meaning of landscape – especially its capacity to evoke the sublime and transcendent - depends in part on notions of scale. Bodies are instrumental in awareness of scale, space and place, and in the interplay between figure and ground, image and view-book, and collection and context. For instance the physical presentation of photographs, whether as cheap and easily collected prints, or as panoramic images in large viewbooks, forms an important part of the effect that Harry seeks. Viewing the photographs is not deemed sufficient.

Instead, Harry attempts to embody his message in the gesture required to handle the wide books or to tuck his small prints intimately into pockets. Falconer emphasizes that “the first book off his press...Seventy-Five Views of the Blue Mountains Wonderland...was two feet long...in order to view the photographs inside, people would have to open their arms out to the clouds’ (Falconer 149). Harry’s photographs of the sky and its cloudscapes are
designed to be contained, like collectables, “in lockets and pocketbooks”, but also to be handled, and kept close to the body (“to be taken out, creased and warm, to be searched at leisure like lovers’ faces” (Falconer 112)).

The sense of touch (even more so than sight’s customary counterpart, sound) is particularly important in *The Service of Clouds*. As narrator and protagonist, Eureka provides an intensely physical and sensual perspective. Even the passages of reminiscence and analysis, in which a more measured and distant tone is possible, are sparingly used, with no details of the narrator’s present setting or circumstances: instead, all attention is focused on the richly detailed accounts of her early life.

This undercurrent of physical desire in Eureka’s narrative often runs parallel to her sometimes-nostalgic project of historical reconstruction. Eureka’s interaction with her collection of Harry’s photographs (souvenirs of her real or imagined relationship with him), and her attempt to overcome a sense of social and historical distance, is very tactile. She recalls, for instance, “dreams in which I ran my hands across his photographs and each was a whiskered map of silver threads” (Falconer 206), and even notes that she “had traced the photographs in Harry’s viewbook so often that my fingertips were silver” (Falconer 145).

Handling her copies of Harry’s photographs with the pleasure and obsessiveness of a connoisseur, Eureka does, at times, resemble Harry in his role as a photographic hunter-collector — of whom she comments that sometimes she “thought it was only the heart of a landscape which he prized, that frail ornament, harpooned and reeled in on a string of silver light” (Falconer 210). There are overtones of possessiveness in this imagery of the photographic souvenir, which recall the physical control and containment, and the desire for possession of place and history, craved by many of Falconer’s characters.
Falconer’s portrayal of this desire is equivocal and sometimes sympathetic. Eureka’s mother, for instance, shares with her daughter a “historical” gaze that seems to have the same quality of impartial distance that makes photography seem such a distinctive and powerful collecting tool. Having obeyed the strictures of a world that marginalized her, having learned to “blink” at the right time, to “lower [her] lashes” (Falconer 12) and to curb the indiscreet historical gaze that she shares with her daughter, Eureka’s mother — an impoverished and displaced widow, on the edge of becoming an object of charity — hopes to at last turn her viewing skills to her own advantage when she moves to the Blue Mountains. She envisages that her new home (a place of imagined freedom and clarity) will also offer a new perspective on life, and imagines that distance in time and in space will converge to create clear, unambiguous knowledge: “She would see her life spread far out below her gaze until she could make out its bright topography at last” (Falconer 19). The metaphor of distance collapses into an affirmation of presence, of some “still point” (Falconer 4), from which the world’s measure can be taken.

In expecting such revelation and resolution from her retrospective view, Eureka’s mother seems to share, with some historians, a confidence in the possibility of objective distance and associated concepts such as the existence of a transcendent viewpoint (or frame that can hold the gaze). However, when she does at last try to see beyond the boundaries imposed by her social world, her gaze fails her. She had hoped that distance would reveal the pattern of her life and history. The reality, as the disillusioned Eureka recollects it in later years, is that distance may be deceptive: “To live in that high land is to lose familiarity with the shape of things” (Falconer 2) and “in such an insubstantial place it requires courage to trace the shape of history.” (Falconer 4).

Similarly, nostalgic souveniring ventures are ultimately a “failed magic” according to Stewart, and, moreover, are actually “hostile to history and its invisible origins”, because nostalgia seeks a past which has never existed “in
itself“ (23). Falconer draws attention to this problem in the context of her own text’s ambitious concreteness and materiality, through which the history-seeking reader is explicitly invited to step into another (and another’s) place and time: “To understand this story you must put yourself in the place of those earnest young men who visited us then with guidebooks in their hands and tried to imagine these valleys in the childhood of the world” (Falconer 5). This invitation is undercut somewhat by Falconer’s imagery with its layering — perhaps an endless recession — of viewpoints (the reader, book in hand, imagining the past and its young men with guidebooks who are, in turn, also imagining the past).

The souvenir, according to Stewart, has no room for an understanding of history that involves reference to the conditions of history’s own production. As a result, it can be argued that the souvenir also refuses the knowledge of the constructedness and contingency of historical representations. Insofar as Stewart implies that collecting has an enchanting element, it is through a “failed magic” (Stewart 151), a state of “reverie” (Stewart 150), or in an absorbing and inward-looking world of “play” (Stewart 151). The intimacies and distances of the souvenir (or the serial collection) in this context, are those that figure space and time as separate – lost in an endless regression of desire, framed and held at a safe distance. Making history visible, through story or image, souvenir or photographic evidence, may yield only a nostalgic and futile enchantment: holding the gaze indefinitely upon a distant, desired, unreachable object.

The Exotic Souvenir

While the souvenir may structurally fail to achieve its apparent purpose of grasping the past, it can also succeed in promoting other forms of displacement — especially through its associations with the exotic. The word “exotic” refers to that which is foreign, alien or extrinsic, but it has also
accumulated a second, more emotionally charged layer of meaning: according to the Oxford and Macquarie dictionaries, “exotic” often refers to that which is strange, yet also has an exciting, attractive, even enchanting power. The term is often associated with Romantic aesthetics, and had particular currency in imperial discourse.

In his essay “Sublime Utility”, the critic Simon Ryan examines one of the ways that colonial discourse dealt with the problem of taking possession of a foreign place and its history. This involved an intricate rhetorical process of simultaneously affirming the past, in the form of sublime landscapes (usually those that reflected ancient landscapes, pristine and conveniently empty of people) — and promoting or justifying the benefits of the new, colonial world of modernisation and industrialisation. In this way, the sublime, and associated concepts such as the exotic, became implicated in various forms of historical dispossession.

In the world portrayed in The Service of Clouds, similar challenges become evident as the notion of the sublime (with its associations with distance) crosses paths with the region’s exploration history and subsequent tourism industry, and its associated activities — including the types of collecting associated with sightseeing and souvenir hunting. The “exotic”, whether as souvenir or sight, is one such crossing-place. As Falconer notes, Katoomba’s residents and visitors, the “Mountaineers”, so enthusiastic about capturing specimens and souvenirs, are themselves captivated, or enchanted, by exotic and picturesque scenes projected onto clouds by one of Harry Kitchings’ rivals, the cinematographer Mr Hoffman:

For twenty minutes, Mr Hoffman threaded his films...we saw pyramids and Bavarian castles and bathing platforms on the Ganges...the Victoria and Niagara Falls...the Statue of Liberty...these ghosts of landscapes which filled the clouds up with our dreams (Falconer 176).
In the history of Western collecting, the exotic had an important place. Early collections (and many of their later counterparts) usually included samples of strange, foreign and exotic items, often from distant places: “the exotica of the New World” (Griffiths 21). Collecting, particularly the collecting of exotica, formed a link between gazing upon the sublime, and a closer focus on enchanting material detail. It offered a sense of the diversity of Creation, but also implied confidence in some fundamental unifying principle. Like later forms of collecting, in which the individual piece was subordinated to a structure or system, the items in a “cabinet of curiosities” found their common ground in the notion of a transcendent Creator.

Both public and private collecting (whether the museum’s glass case or the “private gentleman’s ‘cabinet’ of curiosities’” (Griffiths 21)) utilized the idea of the exotic, which had an important and to some extent similar role in both settings. In the context of scientific and institutional collecting, while the exotic could be domesticated to a certain extent, through taxonomy or other procedures, it also retained value as something external or extrinsic. It sustained the idea of an outside, a frame, a margin — an authoritative containing discourse. In the context of personal collecting, it had similar functions, as Susan Stewart explains: the souvenir-collector “seeks to reconcile the disparity between interiority and exteriority, subject and object, signifier and signified” (137). She observes, for instance, that the souvenir “displaces the point of authenticity so that it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative” (136). This narrative — a narrative of collecting — is, like other aspects of the souvenir (such as miniaturization and appropriation into an opposition between private and public temporality) a way of asserting the presence of the narrating, collecting subject.

Stewart argues that collecting exotic souvenirs is a taming process that asserts subjectivity by producing “intimate” distance (whether temporal or spatial), collapsing the foreign into the self (and interiorising space): “To have a
souvenir of the exotic is to possess both a specimen and a trophy...It is...placed within an intimate distance; space is transformed into interiority, into ‘personal’ space” (Stewart 147). Graham Huggan, in his study of the role of the exotic in post-colonial literature, makes some similar points, noting that exoticism is political as much as aesthetic; that it is asserts the self, insofar as its objects are unable to look back, and that accordingly, it has long been a valuable way of exercising imperial power (Huggan 14).

The concept of exoticism has long been used to reinforce relationships of centre and periphery; relationships which are also at stake in *The Service of Clouds*, whether in terms of the marginalized status of Eureka as an unmarried, unconventional female, or the regional identity of the Blue Mountains.

Falconer’s description of one of the landmark buildings of the Blue Mountains region, the Hydro Majestic Hotel at Medlow Bath, suggests that it too is, in a way, a collection of souvenirs. The hotel’s design incorporates an eclectic assortment of imported architectural features and materials, and the building itself is filled with exotic curios to attract customers.

A former health resort, it forms one of the focal points of the region’s social world. Falconer’s imagery personifies the Hotel by attributing to it an appearance of exotic femininity: “in 1907, the famous champagne air at Medlow Bath had turned to sorbet. Wrapped in a pink boa of snowclouds, the Hydro Majestic Hotel sprawled on the long cliff ledge as if it were a chaise longue” (Falconer 100). The building itself is an extravagant collection of architectural curiosities — it is also:

as turreted and turbaned as an elephant house...longer than the Gare d’Orsay in Paris...you might think it a vast Brighton dancehall ...The verandahs, of Italian marble, hung over the Megalong Valley ...catching in the wind the pink scent of Ferrara...The casino [was] purchased in Chicago...The dining room...was as palmed and humid as the Raffles’. The...billiard tables...had been crated out from England...In copper
tanks in the pumproom were stored the mineral waters of Baden-Baden. (Falconer 101)

As Falconer writes in her first chapter, early European explorers initially regarded the Blue Mountains as an “inconvenient…” barrier: something to break through to reach the imagined rich interior of Australia (2). Later, though, they became a popular holiday resort and a thoroughly historicized landscape, “collected” on many levels, in the mythologies of colonisation and nationalism, or in holiday souvenirs. They represented a breakthrough moment in possession (a key element of collecting) — and yet, insofar as they were appreciated only in terms of an imported aesthetics (“grand dreams of elsewhere” (Falconer 1)), the “local” was, in a sense, strangely absent. The description of the Hydro Majestic resort in The Service of Clouds provides an example of the role of exoticism in such relationships, but notably, also participates in the oscillating, unstable and manifold significations of distance and proximity which characterize the discourses of history and place, as they are portrayed in Falconer’s novel.

A similar oscillation and instability also emerges elsewhere in Falconer’s text. For instance, Falconer highlights many similarities between photography and the collecting of other souvenirs, including their associations with science, empire, and Romantic aesthetics, metaphors of distance and proximity, and their implications for notions of history, place and possession. However, it also is important not to overestimate the capacity of these collecting activities to function as vehicles for the ideological and discursive formations that produced them.

Elizabeth Edwards, referring to the role of photographs in archives and museums, draws on a range of relatively recent developments in history and cultural studies to observe that “within the archive and the museum there is a dense multi-dimensional fluidity of the discursive practices...Meanings come in and out of focus, double back on themselves, adhere silently” (Edwards 4).
Significantly, Falconer’s references to collecting often acknowledge this
heterogeneity and contingency, and its potentially entrance-ing implications.
Just as Harry Kitchings’ photographs are ambiguous and variable in their
effects, souvenir collecting (an activity that frequently involves enchantment
with distance and proximity) also provides some important examples of a
collection’s disruptive potential, within the context of its host body.

In *The Service of Clouds*, for example, the Hydro Majestic Hotel, although not a
museum, shares some of the features of these institutions. Falconer’s
description of the competing interests of this health resort and exotic pleasure
palace suggest that it represents a complex relationship of ideas and
discourses linked to another trend in nineteenth century collecting, in which
may be traced a potential (if only partial) inversion of the usual associations
between distance, positivist scientific objectivity and collecting, and
universalist modes of representation (including history). This inversion makes
apparent one aspect of the complexity of the relationship between the “local”
and the global, centre and margin; and recalls Lyn McCredden’s reminder that
valuing the local, proximate and present may, in various ways, be an important
part of post-colonial discourse.

For instance, Falconer’s description of the hotel, and the role that collecting
plays in its colourful but erratic career, has a number of interesting parallels to
an account by the cultural critic M.H. Dunlop of the establishment and bizarre
decline of a nineteenth century regional American museum. The Western
Museum, as described by Dunlop, provides an example of how the “orderly
and rational” type of collection was used to establish certain spatial and
political relations in the developing American nation. It also reveals some of
the consequences when the rhetorical work of the scientific museum is
undone by the exotic and the grotesque, after an eccentric new proprietor
purchases the museum, adding exotic curios and bizarre attractions, with a
particular emphasis on hybridity and deformity.
Dunlop describes how the Western Museum was established to house a collection of regional artefacts, organized to show their systematic interconnectedness — which certainly helped to privilege and underpin the authority of the nation. However, she notes that the Museum’s decline, in both scientific and eventually in popular terms, began when the scientific collection was gradually undermined by the addition of the grotesque and its close relative, the exotic. This had the effect of diminishing the importance of the local and particular, and replacing it with a “universalising” discourse of “otherness” — an appropriation of distance, as Stewart might argue.

In *The Service of Clouds*, the Hydro Majestic follows a slightly different trajectory. Established on scientific principles as a health resort, it soon fails and the manager is forced to re-invent the business to match the more fanciful inclinations of his clients: “By the third birthday of his hotel, he had already abandoned his sanatorial ambitions” (Falconer 102). Eureka’s interpretation of its fate is that “[the locals] were too confident...We had laughed at the thought that he could improve upon this climate...smirked at his machines” (Falconer 102). However, despite the apparently parochial pride of the Mountaineers, the proprietor of the Hydro Majestic, Mark Foy, is eventually obliged to close his health resort and supplement the attractions of his hotel with a collection of exotic curios, including the “Medlow Mermaids”, a “male and a female dugong, wearing crowns, stiff and filled with sawdust” (Falconer 207-208).

While Dunlop notes that the American museum eventually failed in part because its inhabitants (“mobile Midwesterners” Dunlop 526) were indifferent to landscape, Falconer’s characters are, in contrast, obsessed with their landscape, and with regional identity. The failure of the health resort with its imported mineral waters and its sampling of global architectural styles is purportedly connected to the fact that it was to function as an unnecessary improvement on the qualities attributed to the local environment. However, the details of the Hydro Majestic’s evolution suggest otherwise.
Although the health resort, built on “a site chosen because it looked like somewhere else” (Falconer 101), seems to privilege distance rather than proximity, and to denigrate the local through its collection of imported architectural features and treatment aids, and its universalizing scientific principles, its collection also emphasizes correlations and relations between regions and natural features (rock, water) which cross political borders. In contrast, the Katoomba locals’ identity depends on a binary opposition of here and there; of otherness; the township of Katoomba (which as a tourist destination is itself a location of the exotic, the “other”) is only appreciated in terms of what it is not, and the Hydro Majestic only succeeds when Foy fully exploits the power of the exotic. As Eureka comments, “the clouds at the end of every street were filled with the grand dreams of elsewhere” (1).

In both examples of collecting, Dunlop’s Museum and Falconer’s Hotel, the objective distance of systematic, scientific collecting initially functioned to support the authority of the nation (or the empire) — but it also helped to explore the networked and relational structure of regions and their “natural history”, and so potentially opened doors to alternative perspectives. Many more such nuances and openings within discursive practices become evident throughout Falconer’s text, through her often ambiguous and seemingly inconsistent use of metaphors and images of distance and proximity; in the form of collecting references which entail a complex intertwining of visual and tactile imagery; and in her prose style, which itself reflects some of these exotic tendencies. In the following section of this chapter, I discuss further examples, from Falconer’s text, of the potentially disruptive effects of collecting-related activities which cultivate exotic distance.

6.4 The Cabinet and the Field: Collecting and Unsettling Knowledge

I suggest that although the exotic curio, safely contained in a collector’s cabinet, may seem to tame distance and secure the subjectivity of the
onlooker or collector, it is possible to identify more unsettling possibilities, including a shimmering of distance and proximity that disturbs the hierarchies of knowledge and power associated with various forms of representation. Falconer’s text offers many instances of such disturbance, in which the exotic exceeds the control of the technologies and rhetoric through which it is produced.

For example, Harry’s uncle, as a photographer/collector, experiences disturbances related to his travels with his mobile studio. In his article on nineteenth century exploration literature, “Distance and Disturbance”, Felix Driver notes that technology — the instrumentation of the scientist — extended the “space of the cabinet into the field, in the interests of metropolitan ‘centres of calculation’” (Driver 82). Driver gives, as an example, a description of a nineteenth century scientist’s wagon which served as “a sort of mobile laboratory” for explorer/naturalists in Africa. (83). This mobile laboratory formed part of a carefully constructed system of observation (Driver quotes William Herschel as saying “seeing is...an art which must be learnt” [Herschel qtd in Driver 85]). The scientist’s wagon was designed to suit its destinations: “global functions calibrated to local conditions” (Driver 83). Driver notes, though, that despite the most meticulous preparations, the relationship between “cabinet” and “field” could not always be controlled.

Unlike the scientist, Harry’s uncle is initially less prepared to accommodate difference in order to control it: he imposes the language of studio photography upon “every frozen town in Victoria”, from the “desert in the west” to the Dandenongs. At each new town, “they would set up a makeshift studio in the open air. He placed Doric columns and vases of dried flowers on a chequered rug. Or he nailed together a staggered row of wooden waves with foam painted on their crests” (Falconer 32-33). However, he eventually finds that, for consistent imagery, “Each different region required special vigilance: against specks of red dust which imbedded themselves in the gelatine surface
of the photographs, or the cloudy bloom of northern dampness” (Falconer 33). Strains and tensions within this environment of control emerge in unexpected ways.

On one occasion, the photographer’s wife sees “a large goanna crouched beside her as the last of the photographs from that day disappeared down its bulging neck. Her husband chased after it but it ran up a tree, its stomach full of carnival hat and horse” (Falconer 32). On another occasion, time, place and distance dissolve and mingle when the photographer’s wife, angry at her husband’s callous indifference to her, carelessly cleans his negatives. As a result, images from one town hybridize with those of another: “In the next town his photographs would turn into strange montages: a matron and a cat-faced boy were joined at the waist like Siamese twins...a bride stood next to the hanging carcass of a bull” (Falconer 33). Although Harry’s uncle remains largely oblivious to many of the disruptions during his journeys, even he cannot prevent situations where his photographs exceed his objectives, and image and reality devour each other, despite his careful calibrations.

The disturbances caused by distance reach their climax, in Driver’s text, in the mental disturbance of one travelling scientist, who, through succeeding “only too well as a collector”, failed as “a philosopher: overwhelmed by his vast collections, he lost his reason...after decades of unpacking, labelling and re-packing his specimens, he ended his own life” (Driver 92). Harry’s uncle, too, finds that his collecting is fatal, although in somewhat different circumstances. Harry’s uncle’s cravings are akin to the desire of the nostalgic souvenir collector or the (self) possessive motives of the collector of the exotic, albeit in a more extreme form.

Never satisfied with the capture of a particular image, he follows his insatiable greed for endless replication of that moment of possession, and that desire reaches a fatal conclusion when he fails to return from an overseas
photographic expedition: “His ship foundered...Although his body was never found his boxes of negatives were washed up unharmed” (Falconer 36). Like the imaginary collector in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay on collecting, “Unpacking My Library”, although perhaps less willingly, he eventually disappears, and the collector/collection hierarchy is reversed.

The disturbing power of the exotic may also be traced through Falconer’s references to the collecting habits of Harry’s adventurous suffragette aunt. The aunt’s travels combine the traditions of the imperial explorer and the colonial tourist, with a strategic waywardness and a rebellious spirit:

Having purchased her own cameras, she travelled over distant mountain passes carrying a sun parasol and commanding...men with the same determination with which she wrote to London to badger the Royal Society to recognize her work (Falconer 34).

The aunt’s collections in many ways typify the exotic as a tool of imperialism. The souvenirs of her travels include

...dark jungle night-moths and pale desert insects...the opaque and calcareous thumbnail of a Chinese scribe, stained by ink and opium...a whale’s tooth, a shrunken head, and a ring woven from the twiny hairs of an elephant’s tail. (Falconer 63)

However, her souvenirs have the potential to create disturbances well beyond the confines of a curio or ornament; even if not dramatic in their impact, they have a seed or spore like quality, affecting Harry’s life to an extent and eventually, indirectly, reaching Eureka.

After Harry’s mother’s death, Eureka receives, “in an anonymous package...addressed in a shaking hand” (Falconer 254), the “great aunt’s [sic] letters” which, she says, “I still carry everywhere I go” (Falconer 254), and which may encourage her eventual departure on a photographic collecting adventure of her own (Falconer 316). For Harry, however, the influence is
disquieting rather than inspirational: “Harry’s mother was disturbed by those packages which bore suspicious scents of stout and gin and gunpowder, and a less tangible odour which she identified as sex” (Falconer 62). The aunt’s influence initially seems inconsequential: “apart from a brief passion for collecting shells . . . Harry displayed none of the ill effects anticipated by his mother” (Falconer 63). Nevertheless, to protect Harry against the influence not only of his forefathers’ photographic legacy, but also his aunt’s gifts, Harry’s mother resorts to homeopathic remedies: “in order to stop him craving for the sea”, she stirs “a teaspoon of salt...into his tea” (Falconer 61).

Much later, the aunt’s gifts of flower bulbs sent from London lead Harry Kitchings to the disturbing atmosphere of landscape gardener Les Curtain’s greenhouses, where he discovers the earthy opposite of his ethereal photographic work: the bulb room, which is “like a crypt...The room also had a charnel stink about it from the great piles of lime and bone dust and blood manure” (Falconer 155). Unlike the light bulbs that illuminate Harry’s sublime mission, the flower bulbs seem to contain darker potential (“racks filled with thousands of bulbs, as pale as skulls in the darkness” Falconer 155). In the greenhouses where Les Curtain works (he also transforms landscape, but in a more material way), Harry, delivering his bulbs, confronts the alarming possibilities of a world where God makes “mistakes” (Falconer 55), and mortality and decay underpins the continuity of nature.

With its rich accumulation of historical details, including references to obsolete beliefs, technologies, products and brand names; and its eccentric characters, some (like Harry Kitchings and Matron Coan) based on real historical figures and carefully catalogued in an “Acknowledgments” section at the conclusion of the novel, Delia Falconer’s text itself evokes that “cabinet of curiosities” described by Griffiths (21). The effect is heightened both by her lavishly metaphorical writing — laden with sensuous, synaesthetic imagery — and by a narrative structure that punctuates lengthy sections of reminiscence.
with brief, isolated, vignette-like images or memories, in the form of gemlike sentence-fragments. Falconer’s prose — not only in her descriptions of the Hydro Majestic but elsewhere in the novel too — is as flamboyant as the exotic collections she describes; it may be a parody of the exotic, or an indulgence in exoticism.

In some respects, if Falconer’s own references to the exotic are assessed in the light of Stewart’s observations about the exotic souvenir, it could be argued that her narrative repeats some of the questionable aspects of framing and distancing that are attributed to Harry Kitchings and other collectors in *The Service of Clouds* and the other novels. This raises the possibility that Falconer, like some other post-colonial writers, may have succumbed to an aestheticization of the past which reiterates the problems it attempts to expose.

Stewart acknowledges that “the exotic object is to some degree dangerous” (Stewart 148), although the note of caution in this very qualified comment is belied by her confident assertion that “[t]he exotic object represents distance appropriated” (Stewart 147). The critic Graham Huggan argues that postcolonial writers, “working from within exotic codes of representation” may manage to subvert, redeploy, or otherwise unsettle exoticism, which is “an at best unstable system of containment” (Huggan 32). Although he also warns that “[s]trategic exoticism...is not necessarily a way out...”, and in fact “might be...a further symptom of it” (Huggan 32-33), he does note that exoticism may be “unstable” and unpredictable:

\[
\text{while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things, it also denotes an expanded, if inevitably distorted, comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation (Huggan 14).}
\]
The ambiguity inherent in this strategy emerges in Falconer’s depiction of everyday life in Katoomba, and its variously enchanting and disturbing juxtapositions of the exotic and the banal. For instance, Falconer makes it clear that one of the most important, but also problematic, features of Katoomba’s own exoticism is the town’s ability to offset or manage the magical qualities of the famous clouds with various systems of containment and control, of which collecting is one of the most popular. Life in Katoomba involves a strong, increasing and often stifling sense of interiority — tightly closed houses, elaborate collections of decorations that domesticate the region’s “exotic” flora and fauna. Against this is set the constant risk, in mountainous landscapes, of a catastrophic failure of containment — that is, the risk of dissolution, of falling off the edge of the abyss (a balance that, in the sanatoria and elsewhere, is enacted in the very act of breathing — air, lungs; junctures and enfoldings of inside and outside).

This claustrophobic tension intensifies throughout the narrative, as Eureka, through her unorthodox behaviour and social failure, becomes an object of curiosity in Katoomba society’s own “collection”. After her “disappointment”, when Harry Kitchings unexpectedly announcements his engagement to another woman, Eureka finds herself rejected not only by Harry but also by Katoomba society: “The women sat waiting with glassy eyes, watching us...I saw that there was no place for me among them” (Falconer). Through their “glassy” gazes, Eureka — a social aberration — is now securely contained, framed as a specimen, ageless and timeless, “like one of Mr Darwin’s superseded insects”, or the “fossil dragonflies which Sir Wilfrid used to weigh down the papers on his desk” (Falconer 251). She comments that:

It was as if my own history had ended. From then on I saw all the changes in the town take place but took no part in them myself... I relied on my powers of deduction. Whatever history found me out had to squeeze through the doorway of the shop in the remote form of its symptoms. (Falconer 251)
Eureka’s sense of confinement is tangible and vividly described. Even in the early days of her employment, she suffered from “the repeated shock of crossing doorsteps” (Falconer 81), and the “light leaped down to slap [her] in the face” (Falconer 81) as she moved briefly between the cabinet-like “cardamom stillness of Medlicott’s Dispensing Pharmacy” and her “aunts’ house, where the windows were nailed shut and the air smelled of warm cushions” (Falconer 81).

However, Eureka’s viewpoint may be limited — but it is also a gaze of surveillance, the gaze of an outsider — a spectator — and in this respect, it is both passive and potentially powerful. Eureka’s mother “had the grace to turn away” (Falconer 12), but Eureka’s “historical eyes” look back; albeit at some cost. Even after her meticulous observation of Harry ceases, and she spends her days confined in the cabinet-like interior of the pharmacy, Eureka still finds herself a silenced witness to the town’s most intimate secrets.

Collecting, despite its association with domesticity, is traditionally imagined as a masculine activity: writers from Benjamin to Baudrillard gender the collector (and historian) as male; and the collected item as passive and feminine, yet exotic and even dangerous. This double standard usually serves to reinforce, rather than disturb, the sense of power and distancing provided by the exotic. However, in The Service of Clouds, Falconer, rather than simply reversing convention by writing about the power of a female collector, depicts a female whose collecting remains potential rather than potent, and is structurally rendered invisible. Her portrayal of Eureka in this context introduces a certain element of reversal, whereby the spectacle, the curio, looks back at the collector. Yet Eureka’s isolation and socially imposed passivity are undeniable, as is her status as an aberration or curiosity; an exhibit in a cabinet. Falconer’s text, through its equivocal enchantment with the exotic, positions Eureka — to a certain extent — as a victim; but also exposes the contingent nature of this
positioning, and evokes a slight shimmering, or oscillation, of collectable and collector.

Profitable Mistakes

The “exotic” curio is often not very far from something even more potentially disturbing and mesmerizing, although less conventionally enchanting: the hybrid. Like the exotic, references to the hybrid or grotesque object are often employed with the effect of reinforcing the notion of the normal. However, in this section of the chapter, I will argue that many of Falconer’s references to hybridity (a condition often found among exotic curios) also add to the shimmering of distance and proximity in her text, by contributing to an uncanny and enchanting sense of mobility and transformation that often characterizes her deployment of the collecting motif.

As Dunlop’s description of the Western Museum indicates, collectors have often disclosed a fascination with the bizarre, grotesque, or curious, and especially with things that are difficult to classify. Among the various examples of collecting in The Service of Clouds, there are many examples of this, such as the “Lunatic Asylum” of plant breeder Les Curtain, a section of his garden where: “he kept the failed results of his experiments — irises with obscene flesh hanging from the flowers, dwarf narcissus too weak to raise their heads. It amused him, he said, to walk by and find some interesting monster. ‘I profit on God’s mistakes,’ he had told Harry, ‘just as you do with your camera’” (Falconer 155).

Les Curtain seems to attribute both the grotesque and the picturesque to “God’s mistakes”, perhaps because each contains an element of imperfection. Likewise, the collecting habits of Eureka’s employer, the pharmacist Mr Medlicott, also “profit” upon such “monsters”. He reveals an unsavoury fascination with the inverse of purity, such as more grotesque aspects of human suffering —— particularly when it has an element of hybridity: “Few
things moved him like an accident, where he could see steel or rubber bonded onto flesh” (Falconer 87).

Collectors, because of their exceptional fascination with objects, are often portrayed as participating in strange crossings of boundaries. Not only is collecting often depicted as a rather unhealthy and unnatural occupation, but collectors may also reveal a disturbing uncertainty about the lines between themselves and the objects of their obsessions. Falconer describes amateur photographers, obsessively collecting photographs of famous sites and sights, as grotesque hybrid creatures: their “hands clutched at cameras which grew like shiny eyes out of their waists...Mr Medlicott thought that they looked as if they were peering into keyholes in the air” (Falconer 91). The image of physical and mechanical hybridity (bodies merging with cameras), and their relentless greed for photographic souvenirs, gives them a grotesque and voyeuristic quality, almost as if craving an even closer, unmediated contact with their picturesque prey. (Such a desire, with extraordinary compression, its convergence of body and instrument, is also reminiscent of McQuire’s comment about the modern desire to reside in the instant (McQuire 251)).

In *The Service of Clouds*, collecting engages with the aberrant, the hybrid, and illicit in various ways, often with the result of highlighting the contingent and constructed character of representation, and the dynamic quality of the supposedly secure frame. For instance, when Falconer writes, in *The Service of Clouds*, that Eureka was born with “historical eyes...focusing on the seams and pockets of the world” (11), the nuances of this abundantly allusive image hint at some of the varied characteristics of collecting as an activity, and as a mode of making sense of the world. Given the novel’s mountain setting, and the importance of landscape and geological imagery in the text, the “seams and pockets” phrase evokes accumulation — mineral deposits: strata, conglomerate or sediment (also reminiscent of the deposits of artefacts in
Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book*, where his collector-protagonist finds “the remains of other times, layers and layers” (Castro 1)).

The phrase “seams and pockets” also gains further resonance from its uses elsewhere in the text of fabric and clothing imagery, especially ribbons (“ribbons stitching together the pink pieces of the British Commonwealth” (Falconer 15)). These images of seams and pockets suggest joins or connections, receptacles, or sedimentary layers, and along with the other references to various forms of articulation and accumulation, reinforce the theme of collecting, and its double possibilities. The beribboned patchwork of the Commonwealth is a reminder that collecting has (like storytelling) long been regarded as a way of asserting power and controlling chaos. However, seams and pockets also have a more dubious reputation (as is evident in a colloquial context, where the words may be used in phrases like the “seamy side of life” or “pockets of resistance”). They are interruptions, joins, and supplements in otherwise smooth fabric; they are locations of connection, collection, concealment, and even aberration.

In *The Service of Clouds*, the role of these seams or interruptions in representation is complex. For example, the “mistakes” in Les Curtain’s botanical collection, and the mis-takes of the photographic shoot are the elements excluded (provisionally) from conventional representations of the Blue Mountains landscape. For many collectors, though, the idea of “mistakes” in classification, identification, or selection is also, paradoxically, crucial; insofar as it implies a “proper” order — deemed necessary if collecting is not to descend into an anarchic, arbitrary, even self-destructive activity. As well, the possibility of mistakes is foundational to the effectiveness of the genre of photography practiced by Harry and his colleagues — for instance, the carefully composed image of Eureka’s mother and aunts at the Three Sisters landmark is arranged to look natural, like a “beautiful accident” (Falconer 57).
Conversely, as Jane Bennett notes, some “mistakes”, in the form of “crossings” or hybrid forms, can cause fear and revulsion because “one dreads the world they seem to seek, one in which all diversity is eliminated for the sake of the domination of one type”; a final dissolution of difference, achieved paradoxically through “total freedom and wild disorganisation” (Bennett 25). Falconer seems to hint that a similar glimpse of such total power may motivate Mr Medlicott’s apparent fascination with grotesque deformities and hybridity, (something he seems to share with Dunlop’s eccentric museum curator). However, Falconer’s images are significant not only for the glimpses they provide of collecting’s darker side and its relationship with power, but also because they may be integral to the issues of representation that her novel explores.

Laura Joseph (1), for instance, has argued that society’s deployment of, and responses to, such images have some significant, if questionable, discursive functions. She proposes that “the inverse, the perverse, the monstrous and the aberrant are inaugural to the production of the discourses of identity”, and that this is especially relevant in the context of the development of an “Australian identity” (Joseph 1). She also argues that although early Australian writers emphasized the “weird” and inverted character of the landscape, this does not wholly entail a prescriptive formulation of a correct form or identity. Joseph proposes instead that their tropes of Australian “nature as ‘learning how to write’ ” may be read as implying that this is also “the nature of learning how to write” (Joseph 19). There is, she suggests, in this emphasis on tentative reformulations (the accidents in learning how to write), a sense of potentiality that not only characterizes Australian literature’s constructions of national identity, but also offers possibilities for approaches to understanding “future formulations of identity” that must utilize but can also problematize “universalist philosophical nationalism” (Josephs 19).
The images of hybrid forms in Falconer’s novel are not confined to the grotesque and horrifying. Bennett suggests that “cross-species encounters” and other forms of “crossings” may be a source of enchantment, not simply of fear and revulsion, although she also acknowledges some ambivalence about such crossings: “not all crossings, of course, enchant. Their affect-effect will vary according to the context of the encounter and the significance of the body and sensibility that they confuse” (Bennett 30). Bennett (31) also suggests that the word “crossing” is preferable to “hybrid” because, she argues, it suggests an element of newness, rather than a ‘compound’ of two pre-existing entities.

Falconer’s prose, especially her portrayal of collecting, often evokes such crossings, in the form of uncanny effects of mobility and shimmering and imagery of synaesthesia and transformation. In the conclusion to this chapter, below, I will argue that Falconer’s depiction of these collecting-related enchanting transformations represents a complex engagement with distance, and proximity and presence, which has some significant consequences for notions of history and place.

6.5 Transformations: Collecting and Liquid Possibility

One of the distinctive qualities of the collecting motif, as employed by Falconer, is its association with a sense of the liquid possibilities of the objects; the fluid transformations of meaning and perception which mesmerize and enchant the novels’ protagonists, an often uncanny effect which is also reflected by Falconer’s richly metaphoric prose with its synaesthetic imagery. I suggest that the sense of enchanting “liquid possibility” evoked by Falconer’s allusions to collecting and materiality informs the “entrance-ing” potentiality of this motif in Falconer’s text, and has significant implications for Falconer’s themes of historical and spatial representation.
Falconer’s imagery evokes an almost constant interchange and mingling of sensory experiences and material qualities; whether it is the alchemy through which gold, silver, blood, and flowers seem interchangeable in Falconer’s references to the “cure-atorial” pharmaceutical practices of the sanatorium (284-286), or the mysterious way that photographic processes “poisoned the image in order to grant it eternal life” (30), or the tasting of texture, the touching of sights, or other olfactory and material transpositions. This is mirrored by the fluid, transformative, recontextualizing potential of collecting itself, which invokes an enchanting and entrance- ing sense of metamorphosis, transformation and movement.

For example, photographs in *The Service of Clouds* are not only collected or displayed in trunks or albums, windows or books, the physical attributes of which influence the photographs’ intelligibility, but are also handled and caressed. Their meanings variously disintegrate or coalesce in a matrix of chemical fluids, geography, climate and the “fickle and parsimonious sunlight” (Falconer 27). One interpretation of Falconer’s representation of the material ambiguity and “crossings” of the photographic print could be that this not only reflects photography’s broader epistemological and ontological significance, but also provides a key for understanding a particular era. Scott McQuire contends that the development of photography induced a crisis at the border between representation and reality, by “decentring the authority of embodied perception and destabilizing the customary relationship between presence and absence, affecting all contemporary experiences of time, space and memory” (McQuire 1), and Falconer’s descriptions of Harry’s photographs often seem to exemplify this phenomenon.

Eureka, for example, finds an image in her collection which reveals a time and place where both these dimensions of experience (temporal, spatial) are fluid and unstable; where Romantic aesthetics and encroaching modernity overlap, when it was possible to again “see the ephemerality of mountains, rising,
trembling, and melting like jelly” (Falconer 5); and the chain of past and future is broken. Eureka observes that the figures in Harry’s photograph are “watching on the raw edge of a space they cannot yet imagine — observing, in the air beyond the frame, that solid, overhanging future which has crashed down beneath their feet” (Falconer 235-236).

However, this interpretation of this particular photograph, and of photography’s role in the text, holds its own potential problems. Elizabeth Edwards, for instance, comments that to “reduce photographs to ineffable nostalgia and pastness…restates the trope of the disappeared ‘authentic’” (11). Arguably, such a restatement of this trope could be inherent in any reductive assumption that the photograph embodies the “crises” of modernity or encapsulates an era, rather than remaining in a dynamic and contingent relationship with its contexts. However, I propose that Falconer’s references to collecting and collections function in ways that also draw attention to this dynamic and contingent aspect of the historical object.

Elizabeth Edwards, referring to Walter Benjamin’s tendency to use “photography as a metaphor and allegory for history and memory, which breaks down into images not stories”, has noted the importance, to Benjamin, of “the fragment and the materiality of the past as manifestations of unique experience” (Edwards 10). Edwards asserts, similarly, that collection and object have a dynamic relationship:

> the material forms in which photographs are arranged, how they are printed and viewed, as albums, lantern slides, or mounted prints, is integral to their phenomenological engagement, structuring visual knowledge as well as those related human actions in modes of viewing. (Edwards 16)

Thus although Harry Kitchings’ photographic collections or viewbooks, for example, are not in themselves examples of “Benjaminian”-style collecting, Falconer’s references to the enchanting fluidity of collecting and collectables
provide many reminders of the mobility and semantic instability of these collections/collectables.

Falconer’s references to collecting also reiterate that, despite the problems associated with tropes such as nostalgia, the sublime, and the exotic, the desire for a distant “elsewhere” which characterizes these tropes is not simply exchanged for contentment with the present and proximate. Instead, her emphasis on the material qualities of objects brings distance into entrance-ing play with proximity and presence. When, for instance, the Hydro Majestic is eventually destroyed by fire, the loss of this gigantic cabinet of exotica and souvenirs of “elsewhere” seems to be the catalyst for the end of nostalgia: “It was as if, for once, we all concentrated on the present without longing for some transformation to take place” (Falconer 310). Although it is apparently a moment of disenchantment, Eureka comments that “Like Harry, I wanted to make others see the memories...On the other hand, I did not think, on the whole, that sadness was such a bad thing to give up” (Falconer 310). Nevertheless, even in this moment of stability, Falconer’s description of the hotel’s relics includes images of mobility and transformation, and re-enchantment.

As old curios are brought out, they seem vulnerable and almost unrecognizable, like a snail without a shell. From “an unburned shed” workers “bring the objects out into the light. There was an old X-ray machine and three light boxes and some barrels of Baden-Baden water thick with dust...[and] two shrivelled figures...the Medlow Mermaids, the stuffing spilling from the stitches in their skins” (Falconer 309). However, the objects are almost immediately transformed and re-appropriated: “Hundreds of people moved about the ashes, stooping now and then to pick up forks and bedknobs and the gilded corners of picture frames. Some of them posed for photographs on the charred remains of sweetheart sofas” (Falconer 308). The collecting of souvenirs continues as sightseers discover the remains of its collection of
exotica, but, in the ruins, the “dialectic” between frame and image, inside and outside, distance and proximity, which, according to Stewart, structures both the exotic and nostalgia, seems less clear-cut.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden comment that despite a trend towards finding the sacred in the proximate, and emphasizing the “grounded” and “located”, Australian literary fiction continues to engage with distance, especially in the form of the horizontal sublime, in a “double-voiced discourse”, a “heteroglossia”. They note that there is:

an aesthetic dance in Australian literature, a dance that swirls continually between the perception of the sacred sublime, the ‘presentation of the unpresentable’ in distance — the horizontal openness of Australian space...and in the intimate and proximate presence of material things, which in their own way intimate the unpresentable — the sacred possibilities — in their very presence. (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden 12)

The collecting motif plays an important role in contributing to this effect in The Service of Clouds (and, as I note in the next chapter, it also has similar implications in Carroll’s novel), although I suggest that it emerges as a sometimes uncanny shimmering, rather than a “swirling” between opposite poles. This shimmering evokes both a mirage-like uncertainty and a sense of “liquid possibility”.

When, after Harry Kitchings’ death, Eureka finally leaves the Blue Mountains to pursue her own photographic career overseas, in one way she reiterates a traditional pattern of colonial marginality and desire for elsewhere; but at the same time, she embarks on another sort of “crossing”. Eureka’s photography is a sort of tentative and provisional collecting and recollecting. Her collecting remains haunted by the past, through which she senses a “ghost liner made heavy by history and yearning, which sails within the shape of the Niagara” (Falconer 315). Her melancholy tempts her to continue “…drifting around the
globe, slipping along gangplanks from one ship to another” (Falconer 315-316) until her own picture completes itself and “there is no more space for labels on my trunk” (Falconer 316). However, the haunting is not just nostalgic but uncanny in its effects.

On board the ship, she takes photographs of the passengers with Harry’s camera: “a collection of sly gestures...Bodies are oddly cropped and framed by the edges of the glass” (Falconer 314). The unfinished spontaneous realism of Eureka’s photography uncannily exceeds the frame that contains it: as Elizabeth Edwards suggests, “[p]hotographs are painful” and not only “their content matter” but “sometimes their truth-telling, their performance of histories, their reality has a painfulness — rawness” (Edwards 6). Edwards notes that all the photographs she discusses “whether as exchanged objects, colonial documents or cross-cultural explorations, were intended to present some closure within a specific body of practice, but...they present, instead, points of fracture, an opening out” (Edwards 6). Edwards’ image begins with the discomfort of unfinished rawness, and concludes with a suggestion of the enchantment of the compelling movement, the reaching out, of collecting.

This is reflected in Eureka’s entrancement and interaction with her collection. Each night, Eureka rearranges the images: “I move these rectangles about, as if they are pieces of a jigsaw, at once fragmented and suggestive. The hint at some compulsion which has remained unseen, even as it made its order felt” (Falconer 315). The image of the jigsaw, coming apart and drawing together again simultaneously, evokes the shimmering between the whole and the fragment that characterizes collecting. It also has implications for the problems of historical representation and visibility.

Although Eureka’s new collection elicits a wistful and persistent desire to find a hidden shape, the image that can hold the gaze, she also recalls that when Harry taught her photographic composition, “perversely, my eyes were drawn
to the creases in his thumbs” (Falconer 316). She ultimately opts to take photographs of world events (“hungry men and women pressing through the streets...cases of British ribbons...forming nests for rats on Indian docks” (Falconer 316), but unlike Harry and his forebears, her images will remain incomplete. They will “act like hinges in the air”, confronting, yet also inviting engagement and transformation (Falconer 316): “so painful that they make people want to look away; that they will feel the urge to enter and put right the world they represent” (Falconer 316).

The collecting activities of Harry Kitchings and Eureka Jones have certain parallels with the work of the early nineteenth century naturalist, geographer and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt. According to critic Claudio Minca, von Humboldt (like Harry Kitchings) combined the techniques and tools of modern science with the Romantic “aesthetic gaze”, as a way of dealing with tension between “the direct, unmediated experience of the voyage and scientific abstraction” (Minca 188). The critic Chung-lin Kwa also notes that, for von Humboldt, the aesthetic gaze, including the notion of “landscape”, was the “direct precursor of the abstract, the space of (romantic) science” (Kwa 158).

Humboldt’s “holistic” approach (and association with colonial powers) may seem at odds with the emphasis on fragmentation and subversion in some aspects of the novels I discuss. However, his work was also notable for what Minca calls the “Humboldtian compromise”, whereby the knowledge of facts, of the reality of place, depended on a conscious and explicit construction of a way of seeing. It involved, Minca argues, a sense of the world’s “haze” (or “bruma” (Minca 191)), a space of “nebulous clearness...that envelops things at a distance...and...for Humboldt was the metaphor of every projectual intention: always on the horizon but never accomplished, indeterminate in its furthest contours” (Minca 183).
In the conclusion to *The Service of Clouds*, the melancholy mood of Eureka’s departure is also belied by the cautiously hopeful concluding images in Falconer’s text, when Eureka, standing at the ship’s railing, sees that the air is “like a great water drop, trembling...Or a blue lantern slide...waiting for an image” (Falconer 316). In its tremulousness, the luminous air, poised on the horizon (that image of sublime distance), defies conclusive spatial judgements. This trembling of the light and air, like shimmering, is more than a simple oscillation of distance and proximity. It evokes mirages and reflections, visibility that is possible in terms of something that is not there.

The images (similar yet also markedly dissimilar) of the water droplet and the lantern slide suggest, respectively, the homogeneous yet mobile qualities of “liquid possibility” and the defined yet flexible qualities of the “hinge”. Derrida has suggested that the “hinge” may exemplify the spacing or discontinuity that contradicts traditional distinctions between speech and writing, and that such “spacing” is the “becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space” (Derrida, “Of Grammatology” 66). I suggest that the images that Eureka collects with her own camera exemplify this “hinge” effect. Rather than casting an enchanting spell and holding the gaze, they invite entry, but less to a particular place than to the potential of placing, and replacing.

Many of the other instances of collecting in Falconer’s novel are, similarly, both enchanting and entrance-ing. In some instances, Falconer’s richly textured prose echoes the cumulative impulse of the collector and shows tendencies to cultivate a questionably nostalgic enchantment with the material particularities of a place and an era. Overall, though, her text not only incorporates, but also interrogates, the Romantic tropes such as the sublime and the exotic that have informed some aspects of Australian history (and in this, it has much in common with Carroll’s novel, which I will consider in the next chapter). As I have argued, her use of the collecting motif exemplifies one way that an enchantment with materiality can also contribute to a productive
critique of historical representations, by creating an enchanting and often uncanny sense of shimmering of distance and proximity, where relationships between observer and observed, centre and margin, cabinet and field (or the past and history/ies) emerge as unstable; brimming over with both melancholy uncertainty and entrancing potential.
7. The Days and the Distance: Collecting, Speed, Stillness, and History’s Visibility in Steven Carroll’s *The Time We Have Taken*

The suburban setting of Steven Carroll’s novel *The Time We Have Taken* forms an apparent contrast with the dramatic landscape portrayed in Falconer’s novel. However, the novels share many similarities, particularly an emphasis on the enchanting and even sublime qualities of the everyday material world. In *The Service of Clouds*, though, the enchanting and entrance-ting potentialities of the collecting motif emerged against the current of Falconer’s portrayal of a gradual process of disenchantment, as the magical world of the Blue Mountains fades; and accordingly her portrayal of collecting’s association with enchantment is often ambiguous and equivocal. Carroll’s novel, to some extent, follows the reverse trajectory, weaving a spell of enchantment around a place which has historically been marginalized.

In this chapter, I consider how the uncanny and entrance-ting function of the collecting motif continues to operate within Carroll’s strategy of re-enchantment, which involves and interweaving of imagery of movement and stasis (and consequently, distance and proximity), through which History is imagined as both a relentless current of time, and a succession of distinct eras. I draw on Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden’s concept of the “proximate, embodied sacred” (13) and Benjamin’s notion of materialist historiography as a process of shocks or crystallizing interruptions, to argue that Carroll’s references to collecting entail a sense of enchantment and a shimmering of distance and proximity, which play a small but significant, and entrance-ting, role in his text’s distinctive evocation of historical time and re-appropriation of the Romantic discourse which dominated certain representations of Australian history.
7.1 The Sublime and the Suburb

In this section, I briefly outline the role of Carroll’s use of collecting motifs in his text, discuss its connection with his portrayal of suburbia, and consider the implications of this in the context of Australian literary and cultural discourse. In particular, I explain how the rhetoric of Romanticism, in conjunction with other factors such as economic and political expediencies and gender discourse, influenced the construction of the notion of “suburbia” and contributed to its equivocal role in narratives of Australian history.

The Time We Have Taken depicts the events that overtake a quiet Melbourne suburb over one year, as witnessed or experienced by one family (the protagonist Michael and his parents Rita and Vic) and their friends and acquaintances in the neighbourhood. The events, presented in a series of tableau-like vignettes, are not dramatic; but Carroll’s prose conveys — in a tone that combines wryness and rapture, elegy and irony — a strong sense of the sublime in the otherwise mundane suburban environment. Through Carroll’s wry observations of the parochial details of suburban life — shops and houses are built, decorated and sold, neighbours arrive and leave, families separate, children grow up, parents grow old, political movements rise and fall, and factories close — the anonymous suburb acquires a grander stature; a location of the powerful, if questionable, forces of “History” and “Progress”.

Collecting has a much less prominent role in The Time We Have Taken than it does in The Service of Clouds or the other four novels, but it is still a salient factor. For instance, one of the first times that the “march of History” (Carroll 241) becomes apparent to the suburb’s residents is when the Centenary celebration committee organizes an exhibition — and later a museum (Carroll 157) — of the memorabilia and relics of the failing Webster factory, which once dominated life and employment in the suburb. Collecting is also relevant insofar as it relates to the interiors of the various homes in the novel — the
creating and leaving of which mark the movement of time and the beginnings
and ends of eras. Collecting contributes both to the sense of alternating
closeness and distance, and to the moments of stillness, the gatherings,
through which these changes may become apparent.

Carroll’s emphasis on the small details of daily life seems to set his novel apart
from earlier literary traditions, in which, according to critic Gary Kinnane,

[a] persistent bush/city polarization has produced a rich vein of
Romantic literature, in which imagination has been given preference
over observation, such that the worlds in which we have attempted to
locate our myths of identity and aspiration have been other than the
ones we inhabit daily. (Kinnane 42)

As is also evident in Falconer’s portrayal of representations of the Blue
Mountains in The Service of Clouds, the popularity of Romantic aesthetics and
rhetoric, such as the sublime, the picturesque and the panoramic, “is not
simply an aesthetic question...it [the picturesque] is a way of according the
land an aesthetic value but is also thoroughly imbricated with notions of the
land's economic value" (Ryan, Cartographic Eye 71). The panoramic also
involved the "commanding view...a controlling discourse of the visual, it is
embodied as a material practice in the alienation of land and the reproduction
of a British estate system in Australia" (Ryan, Cartographic Eye 90).

For many years the suburb was a problematic anomaly in Australian nationalist
mythology, with apparently little to offer grand historical narratives. Kinnane,
for instance, comments that “[a]nti-suburbanism...has long been a deep
current in the Australian artistic and intellectual mainstream” (Kinnane 41).
The suburb could not easily be framed in Romantic terminology; it was not
regarded as picturesque or sublime, and it also interrupted the simple
oppositions of city/bush, or civilisation/wilderness, which had dominated
Australian identity discourse. It confusingly replicated the spatial tropes of the
bush, but in the name of civilisation and progress. Unlike a garden city, it did
not offer a utopian return to origins, or even the gritty drama and complexity of traditional urban environments. The political and economic conditions which accompanied the rise of suburban development, especially after World War 2, contributed (along with an element of class prejudice) to suburbia’s reputation as conservative and materialistic.

The critic Joan Kirkby, in her analysis of the "suburban imaginary" in some Australian fiction, notes that the bush or the cosmopolitan city were the favoured images, whereas “[t]he suburban was sub-urban, not fully urban — like sub-human, not fully human...Neither at the centre, nor with a centre...hybrid, potentially abject" (2). She suggests that "[v]irulent variations of this theme have dominated the Australian imaginary, undoubtedly owing to complex long-standing colonial anxieties about legitimacy, culture and democracy" (Kirkby 3). As Kerryn Goldsworthy notes in her overview of mid-twentieth century Australian fiction, the “two most significant women novelists” of the 1950s and 1960s wrote novels that made a direct link between “the restrictive material conditions of people’s [suburban] lives seem analogous to the repression of ideas” (Goldsworthy 121).

However, towards the end of the twentieth century, attitudes gradually changed, and Carroll’s portrayal of the suburb in The Time We Have Taken reflects suburbia’s increasingly positive role in Australian identity discourse. The critic Chris Butler, for instance, comments that suburbia “is one of the dominant descriptive motifs in Australian cultural analysis” and observes that an earlier era’s fascination with “colonial trappings and myths of the rural settler [has] now largely been displaced by an interest in a deconcentrated form of settlement space, which is often assumed to be a characteristically 'Australian' mode of urban life" (Butler 11). Celebrations of suburbia, however, still risk perpetuating class, race, and gender stereotypes, and may be just as problematic as indiscriminate condemnation; but as I will argue below, Carroll’s novel (though often nostalgic and affectionate in its portrayal of the
suburb) avoids many of these problems, through a sensitive exploration of the potential of the quotidian for moments of uncanny historical insight and enchantment.

7.2 Speed and Stillness

In this section, I consider how Carroll’s allusions to collecting contribute to and illuminate the images of speed and stillness which are the dominant motif and metaphor of his text; are a powerful source of enchantment for his protagonists; and play an important role in his examination of the ways that history becomes visible. Like the Mountaineers in Falconer’s The Service of Clouds, the residents of the suburb sometimes indulge in “grand dreams of elsewhere” — elicited, for instance, by Mrs Webster’s new car: “It speaks of somewhere else, of that far-away world out there where wonders such as this are made.” (Carroll 115). The suburb is, in a way, a place for leaving: even two of Carroll’s protagonists from previous novels in the series are, in this novel, no longer in the suburb. Michael has moved to the inner city and his father, Vic, has left his wife Rita and retired to a coastal town in Queensland or northern NSW, far away from the suburb. In his references to this tension between the suburb and “elsewhere”, Carroll introduces a temporal dimension to the notion of distance, with his motif of “speed”.

Speed is a goal of many of the characters in his novel, who in various ways use it as way of escaping from or addressing their problems. Carroll’s previous novel, The Gift of Speed, focuses on Michael’s troubled early adolescence, when his interest in cricket develops into an obsession with speed in the form of an (ultimately self-defeating) attempt to become a fast bowler. Speed remains a preoccupation of several characters in The Time We Have Taken, especially the factory owner’s widow, Mrs Webster, in her attempts to understand her enigmatic husband’s fatal, possibly suicidal, secret passion for fast driving. Rita, as Mrs Webster’s employee and temporary, tentative
“friend”, is also drawn into Mrs Webster’s own experiments with speed, while Rita’s own husband, Vic, a retired train driver, leaves Rita and the suburb and moves north, “shooting through” (Carroll 21) to live alone with his own memories of speed.

For all these characters, speed is enchanting. It tempts them because it offers either a form of escape, or a way of attaining distance and insight. However, speed does not guarantee arrival (or communication, or knowledge of the past). In Brian Castro’s novel *The Garden Book*, for instance, speed leads only to disaster, or is never fast enough, as is exemplified by the love letter — arriving “out of time, later, inconveniently”, the letter “betrayed with literary love. Its velocity a function of distance over time” (Castro 239). On the other hand, speed has other consequences too. In one way it is a way of escaping from the monotony (and stasis) of the suburb, and self-evidently a contrast to stillness afforded by collections in the conventional (or non-Benjaminian) sense, with their connotations of preservation, stasis and permanence. Carroll’s text reveals, though, that this distinction is less clear-cut than it seems. In *The Time We Have Taken*, speed ultimately — and paradoxically — produces a sort of stillness, a sense of floating suspension within time where all distances seem uncertain.

For example, when Mrs Webster takes Rita for a drive in her powerful new car, re-enacting the secret midnight drives of her late husband, Rita finds that “At first, speed is everything she imagined it might be”, but then notices “A strange sense of not moving at all” (Carroll 283) — an effect that is ambiguous in its implications. Likewise, for Webster, and in a different way, for Vic, speed leads to a moment of apparent stasis, in which a life may be summed up, and selfhood or subjectivity becomes visible in the moment of its extinction — instantaneously, for Webster, or in a more belated and prolonged way, for Vic, when he retires to a small town to dream of speed. Although Vic’s life in
retirement seems circumscribed and stationery, Carroll implies that it is also, in a sense, a “return” to speed, to the days when he was an engine driver:

Vic sits, long into the night, on his doorstep overlooking the town, driving again...at his most alert and alive, his most complete...Let us leave him exactly as he is now, seated on his doorstep, but in the cabin again...as he was, as he now is and will always be, an engine driver. (Carroll 326)

Although speed is the dominant motif and metaphor in this text, collecting theory offers some useful insights into the ambiguous implications of this imagery of various forms of enchantment.

For example, Vic’s retreat is to a coastal town that Carroll describes as a place of endless Sundays, to frozen time, to no changes, as a way of asserting himself, as single, singular, not plural (Carroll 23). His new home is also a “miniature”: “His world is compact and complete. A duchy unto itself” (Carroll 50). It is, in a way, like a souvenir — such as the snow-domes described by Susan Stewart, in her commentary on collecting. Stewart states that a souvenir is “not simply an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather its function is to envelop the present within the past”. According to Stewart, though, the souvenir is associated with nostalgia — something that afflicts other characters in the novel, but from which Vic seems to be free, even as he laments the impending changes to his compact world. One effect of the souvenir, Stewart writes, is to “deny the moment of death by imposing the stasis of an eternal death” (Stewart 144).

Vic, having escaped his past, also appears to calmly accept his impending end, not to deny it — although death is, in a way, already organized and in place: “it could be any day now. In the suburb he occasionally wondered what sort of day it would be. But here he knows. The sun will shine. Bathers will go down to the sea and the surf will be good” (Carroll 51). Like the minimal interior of his flat, this fatalism seems to be a way of asserting his identity, which involves
“walking away” (Carroll 230); rejecting engagement with others — the “other” is valued as a backdrop, against which he exists. If he engages with this backdrop, working either against or with it — by accepting medical advice, for instance — he loses the clarity of repletion and selfhood — a clarity which is paralleled by his idea that to make a life, all that is needed is an instance of dedication, the one pure thing:

They all had it, and lost it — the best of their living. But at least they’d known it and known what it was to possess such a thing. One single pure activity, that’s all it takes to turn a succession of days, months and years into a life. (Carroll 50)

This sense of conclusive permanence, of fulfilment and repletion, is also a typical aspiration of collectors, even though Vic’s new life could be seen as an anti-collecting gesture — it is defined in part by its contrast with the material world of the suburb he has left behind, especially the material world of Rita, with her enthusiasm for interior decorating, and her continual additions to her house. He lives in a “one-bedroom flat...Clean, sparse...Not a comfortable place, and that’s why he likes it” (Carroll 23). However, there are still some elements of collecting about his new life and environment — elements which inform his particular understanding of history and temporality.

Carroll, in an interview about one of his other novels, notes that this theme (of the “one thing” that can “infuse a life with aesthetic satisfaction” and “makes life all the more meaningful”) may be found in all his books (Carroll, “Interview: The Spirit of Progress” np). In Vic’s case, though, devotion to the one thing, and passive acceptance of its loss, seem at come at a cost. The only other clear option for Vic is to disappear entirely, (like Webster, perhaps), thereby experiencing a freedom where he is no longer Vic. “He has simply become the moment as he always did when he drove from midnight into morning with the wind on his face” (Carroll 296). Exhilarating as this may be, though, it seems that speed can also involve escaping the friction that permits
real movement and change — the sort of friction, or traction, that causes Rita, when she eventually decides to leave the family home, to linger long enough to farewell her old life (rather than “shooting through” like Vic); and then allows her to experience the “secret thrill” of moving on, “stepping into whatever it is that lies before her” (Carroll 327).

Carroll’s references to speed and its paradoxical effects of floating, suspension and interruption, form part of the overall guiding pattern of his narrative, which entails a powerful back-and-forth movement of retrospection and anticipation, alternating between close-ups and distant views, dramatic action and narrative summation. As I discuss below, this strategy has important consequences for Carroll’s exploration of experiences and representations of history and place. In this context, Benjamin’s notion of collecting and fragmentation, and Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden’s concept of the sublime, provide a valuable framework for considering how the enchanting effects of Carroll’s motifs of collecting and materiality contribute to his themes.

7.3 Murals and Mosaics: Moments of Uncanny Interruption

History’s “visibility” has a literal dimension in Carroll’s novel: the focal points of the suburb’s centenary year are the creation of a mural, depicting the suburb’s history, and the collection of industrial memorabilia, created to mark the contribution of the Webster factory to the suburb’s development. In a more general sense, historical understanding and visibility (as in Falconer’s The Service of Clouds) is a function of both distance and proximity — in geographical terms, it requires both getting away from the suburb, and being in the suburb.

Carroll’s plot centres on an attempt by the suburb’s residents to make themselves historically visible; to plan and celebrate a rather arbitrarily defined anniversary; the suburb’s Centenary. His portrayal of these events
alludes to the suburb’s equivocal position in the grand narrative of Australian history as Progress (and to the ways that the same rhetorical forces have marginalized the suburb’s previous inhabitants, the Aboriginal population). Carroll’s depiction of “History” as a potent force of loss and change alternates between images of smooth progress — the image of the highway, the straight lines of speed, experienced by Rita and Mrs Webster — and interruption: the successive dominance of generations, political movements and Ages.

For instance, at the “Crowning Event” of the suburb’s Centenary Year, the mural’s unveiling ceremony, the mayor announces that the suburb’s history can be traced as a “line...a straight line and a true one, that runs all the way from then until now” (Carroll 306). Simon Ryan, in his analysis of the use of visual tropes in claiming territory, notes that "the hierarchy of vision is not forgotten when prospects of the future are discussed...men of the 'highest eminence “are able to see furthest into the future . . . the future is seen clearly belonging to that imperial narrative which informs history" (Ryan 100). Likewise, the suburb’s residents attempt to claim their place in Australian history through the panoramic mural, establishing the suburb in the flow of time and in an ascent of spatial hierarchies (the city, the nation, the empire or other global community).

This long-distance view of history is not, however, clear and uninterrupted, like the lines of single-point perspective in a painting, or the view through polished glass. Carroll’s depiction of the suburb’s centenary mural, and the only official collection in the novel, the Webster factory artefacts, include instances of interruption where, almost in Benjaminian fashion, thought comes to a standstill in enchanted and uncanny moments. For example, the mural is not just an image, but is also a narrative arc, a sequence of events completing a plot:
the hush becomes a silence as a jigsaw of colour and form gradually begins to take shape...from one side of the wall to the other, is a grand tale. And as the crowd realizes that this grand tale runs in a straight line from left to right, in much the same way as you would read a book, heads turn to the left and begin reading the images. (Carroll 308)

However, the mural, painted by the eccentric artist Mulligan, is also slightly more than it appears to be: “From the very beginnings, open land, open country....But, not quite. For there are, in fact, figures on this landscape....not History as most of those gathered in the...town hall understand it. No, History begins with an open field” (Carroll 308). Despite this interruption or false start to the narrative of History, an interruption echoed by the unidentified narrative voice, the potentially disruptive details are quickly subordinated to the bigger picture: “these figures are no sooner in the picture than they are out of it...Written out of the picture and written out of the grand story that it tells” (Carroll 309).

Although, overall, Carroll does not entirely disparage the notion of a “grand tale”, there is a clear element of exaggeration and parody in Carroll’s portrayal of this view of “History”:

And all the time, the living suburb is constantly evolving, through night and day...ever onward, until that perfect day arrives, surely not too far away, when the straight line of History can lie down in its perfect summer garden and pronounce its job done. (Carroll 148)

When the mural is finally unveiled, the “frieze of public figures”, “all gathered at the end of the narrative, not so much individual figures as portraits of Progress” (Carroll 310) is “revealed...to be looking not forward but backwards...facing the wrong direction” (almost reminiscent of Benjamin’s angel of history). To Mrs Webster, though, they seem “silly”, “Like ... yesterday’s men...forever now, upon this wall, facing the wrong direction” (Carroll 311). Mrs. Webster suspects the artist of employing an ancient, subversive cunning, but this passage seems to indicate more than just ridicule
of parochial pride — it implies, possibly, that “Progress” itself is outdated; a historically contingent concept.

For all the novel’s characters, though, the long-distance view remains an important factor in permitting moments of insight, or historical vision. For example, when Rita’s husband Vic visits his local club, he can visualize “the same shifting crowd that comes together every night, the evolutionary history of which nobody remembers now…it’s distinctly possible that this crowd — albeit with different faces - has always sat at the same table”. But he discovers that a “stranger has slipped into his seat — and the table has allowed it to happen — Of course it shouldn’t matter...But these things can throw your whole night out” (Carroll 292-293). The experience is disturbing, but enlightening: “he is given a feeling of distance from the whole thing that he’s never had before. Suddenly he is looking at the table and the room differently...More precisely, looking at his seat differently” (Carroll 293).

Similarly, when Rita’s son Michael waits for his girlfriend at the cinema, he has a sudden revelation that the “[t]he decade they had all shared...was over...And now it seemed inevitable that everybody would rise from where they were...and walk away...It is an intimation of what is to come, of Madeleine leaving, as he knows she soon will” (Carroll 218). Michael’s premonition — and the validity of such prophetic feelings — seems to be confirmed later, when he watches his girlfriend Madeleine at her farewell party:

...he has never observed her at a distance before — and with this indifference...It is, he concludes (as he steps back to take in the full panorama of the table and his eyes go click like a camera) a picture that is already complete, a group portrait, a tableau that stands as it is. (Carroll 267)

Passages like these seem superficially to emphasize a sense of predestination, which might suggest a teleological view of history. However, there is also an element of melancholy and nostalgic loss as well as enlightening clarity about
these sudden disclosures of meaning; a sense that historical knowledge, and the distance covered by Progress, comes at a price. As Rita notes, “you can’t have the days and the distance at the same time” (Carroll 223). Rita’s observation recalls a similar comment by one of Brian Castro’s characters in The Garden Book: “Everything has been stolen from me. The right place at the right time. To be accessible, opportune; being there. It could be said that in order to think this you cannot feel” (Castro 49).

A similar sense of melancholy, and even futility, often emerges alongside the sense of enchantment and wonder that permeates Carroll’s text. Mrs Webster, for instance, finally decides to close her late husband’s factory, the suburb’s industrial centre, after observing “the activities on the factory floor...pressing scrap metal into parts, parts, parts. To become a whole object that, sooner more than later, will break, fall apart, and become scrap metal all over again” (Carroll 261). However, the repetitive relationship between integration and disintegration, between part and whole, as observed by Mrs Webster, also has other implications. This source of disenchantment, this collecting and dispersal and re-collecting, can also be a source of enchantment and wonder and a resource for alternative ways of thinking about time and place, as Carroll shows.

According to some theorists, perhaps most famously Walter Benjamin, the notion of fragmentation and interruption has useful and even radical implications for historical thinking. This has been questioned by some critics, such as the philosopher and critic Rebecca Comay, who asks whether, “[u]nderlying the ostentatious disaggregation of Benjamin’s so-called ‘surrealist’ method is there a faith in unity all the more magical for being unspoken?” Comay warns that fragmentation “…can provide the most perfect alibi for its own denial: preoccupation with the rubble heap can...cloak a deeper devastation” (98). In some ways, this is also reminiscent of Alan Liu’s reservations about post-structuralism’s enchantment with detail; and of Ken
Gelder’s caution that tropes of post-colonial unsettledness (which may include images of complexity and hybridity) sometimes actually entail a reversion to essentialism, with its attendant and problematic notions of authenticity and presence.

However, I suggest that the critic David Ferris offers a useful image of Benjamin’s model of historical thinking and understanding which explains the subversive power of fragmentation and relics in a way that does not subordinate them to a unified whole. Benjamin proposed that, in order to avoid the trap of perpetuating dominant paradigms of thought or historical knowledge, attention should be paid to the process (which involves collecting) rather than the product. He argued that historical thinking should involve “immersion in the most minute details of the material content” (Ferris 6).

Thus, “history is no longer thought of as a master narrative...Instead, history is understood to reside in a mass of material detail”, and, “[c]ontrary to traditional expectations, the significance of these details is derived not from the overall picture or underlying idea (which would be a direct relation) but from the stark contrast between such a picture or idea and the fragmentary discontinuous material it is composed from” (Ferris 6).

Ferris comments of Benjamin’s writing, “the mosaic owes its brilliance not to the overall image it presents but to the brilliance of each individual piece of glass” (Ferris 6). Each of its parts, although part of a whole, also remains independent, a fragment of something else rather than part of a smooth continuum. I suggest that in Carroll’s text, collecting offers experiences which point to some of the ways that an enchantment with fragments, particulars and details can make history visible in ways that evoke a “mosaic” rather than a mural. In *The Time We Have Taken*, the “mass of material detail” also has a startling brilliance or luminosity, which makes historical visibility seem to involve more than a simple choice between “the days and the distance”.
7.4 Enchanting, Entrance-ing Possibilities

The enchanting and uncanny effects of collecting may also be traced through the rhythms of Carroll’s prose. For instance, his use of an omniscient yet anonymous narrative voice has the effect of “making visible” and containing; and thereby discouraging ambiguity. The narrative voice provides a sense of distancing and, in its authoritative tone, echoes the undeniably powerful force that is historical change, but it remains in tension with the cinematic glimpses into lives unfolding in the present tense. It summons the very sense of inevitability that also characterizes the image of History and Progress, while at the same time bringing the reader close to details and stillness (Carroll has emphasized that his novels incorporate a deliberate slowing of time, so that “even though the characters missed the moments they are passing through, and the sheer wonder ...of living, the books [and the reader] hopefully don’t” (Carroll, “Interview: The Spirit of Progress” np)).

Carroll’s prose often seems to be building towards climactic revelations, something that, towards the novel’s end especially, threatens to become maudlin, building towards a higher and higher pitch: “...did we hear the music of the years? Did we see the fiddler’s hand, bowing it higher and higher through days emblazoned with wonder, or were we looking away?” (Carroll 327). His prose often has an incantatory rhythm, slowing the narrative movement through repetition with variation. This has a kinship to collecting, and a potentially enchanting effect. Bennett explains this effect by suggesting that repetitive sounds “like chants and refrains...provide sensory access into the cosmological...dimension of things...building up a little house... [but] even the home locale...is alive with movement and change (166-167)”. As it nears the conclusion, though, Carroll text’s closing speed slows again through a list, a summation, of the quotidian details of the suburb’s life.
In part through his deployment of the collecting motif, Carroll elicits enchantment and also reclaims and re-uses the sublime, although not in the traditional sense of this concept. Carroll’s imagery, particularly in relation to collecting, is reminiscent of the transformed Australian sublime described by Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, as a form of post-colonial sacred. As I have noted, they identify, in some contemporary Australian fiction, an acknowledgement of the enchanting possibilities of “the earthed, proximate, ordinary, political elements of [the] lived world’ (286). This, they argue, not only creates a sense of the sacred through “intimating” the unpresentable (13), but also offers an alternative to a Western-dominated epistemology — a move towards a “presence” culture, with affinities with indigenous perspectives (25). While arguably such a move may, in some cases, be another form of colonialism, in other instances, it may be a respectful, valuable and enriching development.

There are many such references to moments of enchantment in Carroll’s text, some verging on the sublime, some joyous, others more disturbing. For many of Carroll’s protagonists, the moments when history becomes visible tend to be ambiguous and uncanny. One example is the moments when place — the suburb — suddenly becomes visible to Michael, who, when reading the mid-twentieth century Australian novel of Australian suburbia, My Brother Jack, “sees, for the first time in his reading life, the world from which he comes...He is lost in the event of this book. He is...somewhere else, at once familiar and strange. He is somewhere else, both home and not home.” (Carroll 201). Many of these moments of uncanny experience involve the enchantment and “wonder” experienced by Rita, when, watching dawn arrive at her window, she hears a single car start up and knows “quiet wonder...as the world comes back to her. Familiar, but new” (Carroll 11), or Carroll’s description of the suburb itself as a living entity:
Such is the life of the street, and all the streets around it . . . A rug is aired, a letter is written . . . the voice of a loved one returns for a moment while a silver birch glistens . . . All around, the infinitely complex organism of the suburb is going about its business, unnoticed, and as unconscious of itself as the birch is of the pleasure its shining leaves give to anyone who cares to pause long enough to observe it. (Carroll 95)

These enchanting or sublime moments are also moments of stillness, the sort of stillness required for things to become visible — a stillness also found, for instance, in the collection, or the tableau. The main example of collecting in *The Time We Have Taken* occurs in the context of Rita’s involvement in organising an exhibition and helping to establish a museum to commemorate the closure of the Webster factory, one of the suburb’s major sources of employment and a significant part of its recent identity. The actual collecting and curating is a public matter, taken over by professionals (“the local historians and someone from the city library will do that” Carroll 161) — Rita’s job is only that of clearing and organising the exhibition space, making room — but the effect of the collection is also dependent on the locals; on their own, private experiences. However, just as no of sense of distance or moment of speed in the novel seems to be pure, and free of interruption by closeness or stillness, collections like the museum exhibits, or the momentary “tableaux” noticed by Michael and Vic in their daily lives, also evoke — in the stillness and closeness they create — a sense of movement, of displacement.

Collecting has been regarded by many critics as a spatial activity, taking objects out of time, while narrative is often thought to be integral to the perception of time as a flowing, linear movement, as Walter Benjamin contended, that the piecing of a collection may have a dynamically temporal aspect. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, also suggest a connection between movement and a form of collecting in their comments on patchwork: produced from “leftover fabric,
pieces salvaged” from the “scrap bag…[a]n amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways” (476-477). It is constituted in such a way that it has “‘no center’ (476), and...in conformity with migration...is not only named after trajectories, but ‘represents’ trajectories, becomes inseparable from speed or movement in an open space” (477). Rita observes a similar phenomenon when the factory exhibition opens. Watching “Webster’s people” visiting the displays, “gazing upon the fragments of their lives, past and present...the spare parts they produced...not theirs any more...out of reach behind panes of clear, polished glass” (223), she muses “that perhaps they have never felt closer to their work than they do now, looking at things from a distance” (Carroll 223).

Although Carroll’s novel is often dominated by a sense of nostalgic distance, elicited by the passing of time (the “march of History” (Carroll 241)), this emerges alongside examples of the “earthed and passionate experiences of place” that Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden describe (328). Carroll’s text never quite relinquishes the idea of History as a powerful temporal force, moving unstoppably onwards, but he also seems to suggest that time is bound up with the suburb, with place itself. Overall, his references to collecting, and attention to the small but compellingly collectable details of life, contribute to an impression that history is characterized by multiplicity rather than by a single progressive and coherent movement, and that time is immersed in a suburb’s growth, a factory’s development, an individual’s dreams and relationships.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden have asserted that the emphasis on the proximate, material world in recent Australian postcolonial writing reflects a growing tendency (often influenced by indigenous epistemology), to privilege space and place over “time — and its correlates such as history and rationality” (22). However, I suggest that my collecting-oriented analysis of Carroll’s and the other four novels shows that an emphasis on material presence does not
necessarily mean the past is excluded from such literary attention. Collecting’s ability, as a form of engagement with material presence, to evoke enchantment and the uncanny through shimmering and hauntedness, opens the way for a view that space and time are mutually implicated; and therefore also destabilizes identities and essences.

Although Carroll’s prose is often perilously poised between irony, poignancy, and sentimentality; and is perhaps more concerned than Falconer’s with holding the gaze and making things visible; it still conjures an uncanny shimmering effect. His narrative commentary tends to emphasize the profound and perhaps universal themes that may be traced in pivotal, yet apparently unremarkable moments of change. Overall, though, his use of the collecting motif conveys a strong and moving sense of enchantment with the wondrous intricacies of daily life and the subtle powers of ordinary things, which contributes to an entrance-ting acknowledgement of difference and alterity: as Bill Brown argues, the moment of looking at things, rather than through them, may be characterized by a sense of the uncanny (Brown, “Thing Theory” 4), which also has ethical implications: “accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 12). In conclusion, I argue that Carroll’s references to collecting form part of a strategy of enchantment and entrance-ment that reclaims the historically marginalized space of suburbia as a place where History becomes visible, and reveals this archetypal site of sameness and monotony to be also a place of access to the uncanny; access to an Other.
CONCLUSION

The intention of my thesis was to investigate the role and implications of collecting, as an important thematic and/or structural element, in some recent Australian fiction; and to consider the significance of this in the broader context of Australian literature’s engagement with post-colonial discourse. The thesis has focused on the relationship between texts’ themes of post-colonial dispossession, displacement and identity; on their concerns with historical representation as a product of textual and discursive production, and on their portrayal of collecting as a specific form of engagement with the material world, which has significant implications for historical knowledge.

The collecting process, as portrayed in *The Service of Clouds, The Time We Have Taken, The Hanging Tree, The White Earth,* and *The Garden Book* is, in one way, often simply a practical way of recovering and reclaiming the heritage of “outsiders” — those who have been dispossessed, overlooked, or silenced in Australia’s often-contentious past. However, it is also much more than this, as my thesis has argued.

Collecting, as an activity and a motif, is characterized by juxtapositions of materiality and textuality, strategy and serendipity, and perhaps above all by the compelling, fragmentary suggestiveness of historical detritus. It simultaneously invites and frustrates interpretation and incorporation in an overarching story, and its epistemological, social and political implications range from the conservative and reactionary to the subversive and radical. These features are reflected in the novels I discussed in this thesis, in which collecting motifs and devices are utilized strategically to explore and problematize representations of history, and to reveal the subtle and complicated nature of the relationship between text and the material world.

Rather than elide historical difference through a misplaced confidence in
empathy or “domesticate” and contain the traumas of Australia’s history through the safety of distance, these texts employ collecting motifs to explore and confront the past’s haunting, uncontainable and uncanny aspects.

Part I of my thesis maintained that, through its connections with the long-established Australian literary trope of hauntedness, the collecting motif in Castro’s, Watkinson’s and McGahan’s texts problematizes the boundaries of historical time and place, evoking the uncanny in ways that form an effective and entrance-ing strategy for unravelling the rhetoric that connects land, heritage and identity in post-colonial society. Part II of the thesis contended that in Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, the collecting motif functions in ways that intimate the unpresentable, reflect some aspects of a presence culture — and also problematize history — by evoking uncanny and “entrance-ing” moments of transformative openness or mobility, in which accepted concepts and perceptions are successfully destabilized. Both language and materiality remain important factors in this process, which offers opportunities for exposing or challenging some of the structures of exclusion that continue to characterize Australian history and society.

I conclude that, in the novels I discuss, the collecting motif’s associations with hauntedness and enchantment are employed in ways that convincingly contest the limits of Baudrillard’s claims that collecting is necessarily a “discourse oriented…toward oneself” (24). In response to Ken Gelder’s observations about the overly redemptive implications of tropes of hauntedness, David Crouch suggests that the type of continued disquiet required for productive exchange in a post-colonial setting should involve a willingness to explore, rather than the stress of fear; that there is a need for settler colony society to “settle with less certainty” (103), and that motifs of post-colonial writing such as haunted houses “…can be figured as a doorway. By writing and reading these spaces we become willing to enter and be entered, open to collective changes that necessitate going beyond the self”
Entrancing Objects

(Crouch 103). My thesis has argued that a collecting-based reading of the novels I discuss can also reveal many such points of entrance.

Australian novelist Eva Sallis, writing in *Just Words*, a recent collection of essays about the potential of writing to induce “practical...or imaginative change” in times of social and political crisis, identifies a recent changed focus in Australian literature between the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She suggests that during the 1980s and 1990s, “[a]rguably, much literature published in Australia ...was very inward looking”, and cites several genres as examples of this, including fiction which “revisit[s]...our past...” (3)

This fiction “explored a passionate personal and general interest in the question ‘Who are we?’ ” (2), but Sallis claims that “through the early part of this [twenty-first] century, however, that core question has changed, at least it has for me and I think many other writers. I am starting to seek and respond to art that perhaps has at its core the question ‘What are we becoming?’ ” (3).

This question, while very important, cannot be easily disentangled from the question of who “we” are and have been. Claims to place and belonging, whether from the past or the present, often reflect the influence of dominant social groups and are intricately interwoven: the discourses of the immigration debate, or of gender, for instance, have links to the legacy of colonialism or the spatial transfigurations of modernity, and this entanglement is particularly evident in Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels. I suggest that a collecting-related reading of these five novels (published over a decade which spanned the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first) reveals their continuing relevance, and offers a way of gaining some insights into the complexity of the enchanting, haunting imbrication of past and present which underlies the question of what “we” are “becoming”.

The future of Australian literary studies, especially its emphasis on national identity (described by Paul Genoni as “that shibboleth of post-colonial
cultures” (19)), has been questioned in recent years. Some critics have contemplated the potential, and perhaps necessity, of re-configuring literary studies within a broader systemic context, acknowledging that it is contingent on a wide range of other discourses, disciplines, technologies and cultural and economic forces (Gelder “Notes” 2005; Gelder, “Proximate Reading”; Dixon 2005; Webby, Carter, and Davis “The Death Of Australian Literature” 2007). Although I have not specifically addressed it in my thesis, my discussion of collecting has some relevance to this issue.

For example, I have briefly considered some implications of using Benjaminian collecting theory to investigate representations of indigenous history in settler colony literature, and more research could be done to examine the possible interplay of Benjamin’s ideas with theorizations or representations of collecting from other cultures, and to explore the limitations as well as the applications of Benjaminian collecting theory in the context of interpreting culturally specific representations of collecting practices. While some (mainly European and North American) work has been done in this field, such as Rey Chow’s analysis of the potential and the problems of using humanist and Marxist collecting theories to understand Lao She’s narrative of collecting during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Chow 286-301), or Naomi Schor’s observations about the gendered inflexion of Benjamin’s and Baudrillard’s collecting theories (Schor 255-257), there is scope for taking a similar approach to Australian fiction, especially literature written from the perspective of migrant or indigenous experiences of materiality, memory and history.

There are other possible directions for research into the potential applications of a collecting-based reading, and into the uncanny implications of collecting motifs, which could again involve moving beyond the national and disciplinary bounds of Australian literature. In particular, especially, the notion of Australian literature’s uses of collecting as a site of the sublime and of
enchantment could be extended to consider the relevance of collecting as a literary motif and practice in the context of the notion of the “vast narrative”, a concept discussed in Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s book Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives, a collection of essays which examines the phenomenon of vastness in narrative form and content, and especially, in digital media. Collecting has particular relevance to the online environment, which is increasingly filled with the minutiae of everyday life, and functions as a new and seemingly enchanting form of “cabinet” or archive for online collections, from photographs to scanned books; yet also introduces temporal, spatial, and subjective indeterminacies and capacities through which it engages with the uncanny, the vast and the sublime. Through its links with issues such as collaboration, ownership, and sharing, and with dematerialization, accumulation, archiving, dissemination and transience, collecting theory could also be helpful in considering how cyberspace affects the place of literature and the literature of place.

The five novels I have discussed in this thesis employ some of Australian literature’s traditional tropes and themes, as well as exploring some of its more recent concerns. In The Service of Clouds, The Time We Have Taken, The Hanging Tree, The White Earth, and The Garden Book, collecting’s links to notions of the sublime and its role as a form of historical discovery echo, albeit obliquely, the tropes of exploration literature which have been so prevalent in Australian writing. However, I suggest that the theme and motif of collecting offers new directions and starting points for understanding place and history that acknowledge, but also extend beyond, the colonial context of the explorer and the national context of Australian literary criticism. My analysis of Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels reveals that although the use of collecting motifs in these novels may not represent a conclusive solution to the problems of historical representation, it does operate as an effective strategy for problematizing the boundaries of
representations of history and place; and it forms another entrance-ingly useful strand in what Lyn McCredden refers to as the “haunted” complex of “Australian cultural discourses of identity” (13).

In *The Service of Clouds*, when Eureka begins her first ocean crossing and collecting expedition, camera in hand, the image she sees is the luminous, tremulous, bulging light on the horizon: another form of the “nebulous clearness” or “bruma” which Minca (191) describes as a hazy light of potentiality. It is an image that she may not collect, but one that is perhaps an image of her collecting, and of the entrance-ing potential of collecting in *The Garden Book, The Hanging Tree, The White Earth*, and *The Time We Have Taken*. The sense of deprivation and loss that is conveyed in these novels makes a strong plea in favour of not forgetting; of recording and transmitting and revisiting the past, and in this respect, their employment of collecting motifs plays an important role.

In Castro’s, Watkinson’s, McGahan’s, Falconer’s and Carroll’s novels, the theme and motif of collecting conveys the crossings of stillness and movement, of focused intent and receptive wonder; and the transformative possibilities, which inform the potential of collecting for telling hi/stories of places. In these novels, collecting not only reveals counternarratives which take account of the ghosts of the past, but it also haunts narrative more generally, as an entrance-ing reminder of the ghostly relationship between language and materiality, which offers “entrance” to previously untold hi/stories, and to the space in which these hi/stories can be told. It affords a sense of entrancement and also “entrance-ment”, in the sense of enabling an opening and openness through which complex relationships between history and place may be explored, and new patterns of personal and spatial identity may be mapped across the traditional Australian historical and literary landscapes of suburb, bush, coast and desert.
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