“A Nest for Dreaming: The House in Contemporary Australian Fiction.”

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Abstract.

The house is a key motif in Australian fiction, acting as a driver of narrative and a generator of a sense of the personalities of various characters. It is also central to Australian life. Prime Minister Rudd’s 2008 address to the Housing Industry Association, for example, made the claim that Australians embrace the idea of “mass home ownership” and that the desire to own a house is strongly connected to Australians’ sense of security, freedom and belonging.¹ This thesis draws on postcolonial studies, gender studies and close examination of eight contemporary novels, *The Great World* (1990), *The Children* (2007), *Cloudstreet* (1991), *Benang* (1999), *Crush* (1991), *Carpentaria* (2006), *The Memory Room* (2007) and *The White Earth* (2004) to consider the significance of the house in connection to complex notions such as family, gender, Indigenous politics and the relationship between the interior and the exterior. It places these texts in relation to other works of Australian literature, both past and present. Locations featured in the texts span the width of Australia from Hobart to Perth and encompass rural, suburban and urban settings. They were chosen to constitute a variety of houses with different settings as well as narratives about characters that are diverse in terms of social status, motivations and desires.

Acknowledging Gaston Bachelard’s theory that the house is our primary shelter², this thesis considers how Indigenous and non-Indigenous ideas of shelter and settlement are configured in the Australian imagination through the trope of the

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¹ Kevin Rudd. ‘D.R. Dosseter Address to the Housing Industry Association, May 2008, Prime Minister of Australia Website, http://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech/2008/speech 0232cfm (accessed online 30/05/08)

house. Uli Krahn³ and David Crouch⁴ argue that the Australian house is connected to a national sense of guilt because of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and that this prevents a sense of settlement or shelter. Jennifer Rutherford also argues that this dispossession figures in the way the house is imagined.⁵ It is argued in this thesis that shelter and settlement are two entirely different states of being and that while many houses are imagined as makeshift and some are structurally fragile, this does not translate to a space that cannot shelter. It is further asserted that fragility often acts to enhance that sense of shelter. Unlike colonial texts, settlement, where it is achieved in the lives of characters, seems to be incidental rather than a sought-after state.

The lives of women and children in fictional domestic space are often depicted as conditioned by a seemingly intrinsic coupling of domesticity and femininity as Susan Strehle points out when she states that home has been seen to be a place that belongs to women.⁶ Susan Lever warns against the potential to limit or simplify representations of gender when she states that an obvious gap in feminist literary enquiry relates to narratives where male writers adopt what might be seen as a feminist perspective.⁷ This thesis examines desire for the house and desire to escape it from the perspectives of both male and female characters. It is argued that

claustrophobia is experienced by both genders of any race or degree of privilege and that this is often the driver that compels them to flee the house. The thesis also maintains that it is women (of any race) and all social circumstances who are imagined as disadvantaged by their absence from the domestic realm and that the grotesque or the masculine attaches to women who leave the house. Male characters, on the other hand, experience a sense of nostalgia for the house once they leave it.

Susan Strehle argues that home ‘is a space where national discourse speaks and reproduces itself.’ This thesis argues that a complex representation of the nation is described in the novels by drawing on myths that attach to the house. It is also asserted that Australia as an imagined nation is represented by placing or, conversely, not placing it in relation to other countries through the trope of the house.

Bruce Bennett and Elizabeth Ferrier have both flagged the consideration of the house as a fruitful area of scholarship yet few scholars have considered its representation in Australian fiction in any depth. This thesis builds on the few studies that have examined the imagined house in order to create a more complete sense of living spaces in Australian fiction. It establishes original ways of looking

\[8\] Susan Strehle, p. 2
at the trope of the house by considering various aspects such as shelter, Indigeneity and myth. These are facets that have not previously been considered and their diversity makes for a more complete sense of the relationship between contemporary Australian fiction and its houses.

Candidate’s Declaration

This thesis is my own contribution and all sources have been acknowledged. It does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis closely examines the role of the houses in eight contemporary Australian novels. It considers the significance of the house in connection to complex notions such as family, gender, Indigenous politics and the relationship between the interior and the exterior. The house is our first ‘place’ and leaves the deepest of impressions. The childhood house provides a map for the child that establishes boundaries and sets down who is welcome to cross the threshold and who is not. It is the first world of social interaction and within its walls the child learns acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It also provides a first indication of whether or not the world is kind or cruel or both. Gaston Bachelard states that the image of the house ‘moves us at an unimaginable depth.’\(^1\) The house of one’s childhood is the first indication of the significance of the house. Many writers, including Dorothy Hewett and David Malouf, have chronicled its importance. Hewett, for example, acknowledges the potency of the childhood house in her autobiography. She includes a detailed description and begins with the statement that, ‘The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away.’\(^2\) Malouf, argues that the house of one’s childhood is a space of such significance that it acts as a first guide to the world. He states that the house taught him ‘what kind of reality [he] had been born into, that body of myths, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties, affections that shape a life, and whose outline we enter and outgrow.’\(^3\) His belief in the didactic capacity of the childhood house is illustrated by his largely

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autobiographical work, *12 Edmondstone Street*, which details the house of his youth. Malouf’s belief in the influence of the first house informs the relationships of characters, in *The Great World*, to the house. For example, one of the main characters, Vic, never overcomes the insecurity he felt as a child residing in an insubstantial shack built next to a sand dune. While the house in memoir informs the reader of the life of the author in a way that offers insights into both his/her personality and relationship to the outside world, it acts in much the same way for fictional characters. However, it is not just the first house that shapes our lives. Subsequent dwellings are also significant and this is the case for the imagined house in fiction. For example, Vic, in *The Great World*, begins to live with the Warrender family after he loses his home by the dunes and it is this house that shapes his adult life offering him a level of sanctuary that he has not known in his childhood. Although that shelter is never sufficient to erase the insecurity of his childhood it does sustain him for much of the narrative.

Carl Jung emphasised the significance of the house, famously connecting his dream of the house image to ‘the life of [his] mind.’ ⁴ It is just this type of connection between the imagined house and the minds of the characters that inhabit them that creates a deeper understanding of those characters. An example is the way in which the character, Digger, in *The Great World* creates an image of the house of his friend’s sister that he draws on for sustenance throughout his arduous internment in a prisoner-of-war camp. He travels, in his mind, to that house and its ordinary materiality, as a means of escape. This material house and its mental image takes on

a level of importance that explains, in part, why Digger is so drawn to the dwelling after he is returned to Australia. House and mind are also connected in *Cloudstreet* where the moaning of the house echoes the sense that the families are emotionally unsettled. When Oriel and Lester speak of their sense of not belonging their discomfort is symbolised by their relationship to the house.

The centrality of the house as an image is also evidenced by everyday language, which uses the architecture of the house as metaphor; for example, describing eyes as ‘windows of the soul’. Similarly, dwelling in ‘the house of the Lord’ is a metaphor for being a Christian person. The house also often acts as a symbol of the events in the life of the character. For example, in *The Memory Room*, Vincent’s isolated and hermetic home in Canberra reflects his growing obsession with secrecy. Similarly, domestic objects within the house symbolise aspects of the characters’ lives and personalities. For example, Mandy in *The Children* misinterprets domestic objects as a result of the trauma she has experienced as a war correspondent. Domestic objects are also important in *Benang* where tea represents the attempt to assimilate the Noongar people.

Susan Strehle argues that the home is ‘a receiver for public languages and values, a space where national discourse speaks and reproduces itself.’5 The house can thus become a space of national, as well as individual, importance. This is reflected in many of the novels chosen for examination in this thesis. In particular, national myths are reflected through the trope of the house. For example, the myth of

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Australia as a continent secluded from the rest of the world is symbolised by the house in *Cloudstreet* which remains isolated despite being in a urban environment.

The term ‘house’ in the context of this thesis refers to all types of domestic space whether separated or conjoined. It incorporates apartments, mansions and single dwellings. It encompasses the simplest dwellings such as an overnight burrow made and slept in by Fanny Benang and her husband in *Benang*. It also incorporates the elaborate such as the Kuran House in *The White Earth*. The choice of the term ‘house’ rather than ‘home’ is deliberate. A house is not, implicitly, a home. While a home can be as small as a house it may also be as vast as a country. Home signifies a sense of belonging, and if absent, conjures a sense of longing. A house, on the other hand, can never be entirely severed from its physicality. It is foremost a structure, and this is part of its charm. Moreover, where ‘home’ tends to have a positive association a house can provoke a great range of both positive and negative emotions. The dweller in domestic space may feel a sense of belonging, or alienation, comfort or discomfort, security or fear.

The house, then, with its ability to shape individual beliefs and elicit deep emotions is a potent subject and symbol in fiction. It is a central leitmotif, for example, in gothic fiction, often reflecting the personality of the owner. In *Jane Eyre* the mansion ‘Thornfield’ is, initially at least, as forbidding as Jane’s employer Rochester.\(^6\) Similarly, in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Miss Havesham’s house with its stopped clocks and lack of maintenance reflects her stalled emotional development. However, the house in any genre reveals and strengthens the reader’s

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understanding of character. This is the case in relation to the contemporary works of fiction chosen for study in this thesis. For example, in Brenda Walker’s *Crush*, Tom’s generally passive relationship with the house, where he is content to leave the gaps in the bathroom exposed, echoes his engagement with Anna when he allows her to both enter and leave his life with little action on his part.  

Similarly, an uncle’s obsession with a house in *The White Earth* where he retains it even though it causes the departure of his wife and daughter mirrors his obsessive stance on land rights as well as his relationship with his nephew, William.

The house is frequently used as a fictional setting. One of the house’s powers lies in the fact that it grounds the writer’s characters. Eudora Welty’s argument concerning place, where she states that ‘the likeliest character has first to be enclosed inside the bounds of even greater likelihood, or he will fly to pieces’, is particularly relevant to the house. Again *Jane Eyre* is a useful illustration. When Rochester’s house burns to the ground, he does not literally ‘fly to pieces’ but he is diminished. Jane finds him blind and wandering within the ruins of his home. The house is one of the most likely and easily imaginable settings for the reader because it is universal. In this way, the house acts as a plausible enclosure for a character.

The house may also act as a type of character in its own right within the novel. The house is treated as a character, for example, in two of the novels chosen for analysis in this thesis. In Tim Winton’s novel, *Cloudstreet*, the house ‘holds its breath’ while

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it remains empty and waiting for new occupants.\textsuperscript{10} In the early part of the narrative, the house is described as being sad and towards the conclusion of the narrative, it ‘sweeten[s] up like a ship under full sail.’\textsuperscript{11} The changing relationship between the new owners and the tenants of the Cloud Street house is central to Winton’s narrative and most of these negotiations take place within the house. Kuran House in \textit{The White Earth} is also a type of character, signalling its displeasure at the arrival of William and his mother by frowning at them.\textsuperscript{12}

Scholars such as Marilyn Chandler have explored the significance of the house in American fiction.\textsuperscript{13} Chandler considered representations of the house in the novels of writers such as Willa Cather and William Faulkner. In her study, she points to the importance of the house as an ‘American Dream’, a term she utilises to describe the desire to own a separate family dwelling.\textsuperscript{14} Chandler argues that a tension exists in American fiction between the idea of home ownership and the nomadic lifestyle, stereotypically represented in the figure of the cowboy. This thesis will also consider the myths surrounding the house in its Australian context, in particular the myth of ‘The Great Australian Dream’. It is a long-standing myth that Australians revere the house and, in particular, home ownership, and it goes hand-in-hand with the idea that the house is essential to the welfare, both financial and emotional, of Australians. These ideas will be examined for their potential currency in the contemporary novels of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{11} Winton. p. 394.
\textsuperscript{12} McGahan. p.17.
\textsuperscript{14} Chandler. p. 1.
The Australian image of the house is as complex as that pointed out by Chandler in relation to American fiction. In 1964, Donald Horne pointed out that Australia had ‘the largest rate of home ownership in the world’. Over four decades later, owning a house is seen as part of being ‘Australian’. Prime Minister Rudd’s 2008 address to the Housing Industry Association, for example, made the claim that Australians embrace the idea of ‘mass home ownership’ and that the desire to own a house is strongly connected to Australians’ sense of security, freedom and belonging. The Prime Minister stated that:

In the post-war period home ownership became an important part of the Great Australian Dream. The suburban quarter acre block with a hills hoist, a BBQ and a shed became an iconic Australian image.

This perception of a unified ‘Great Australian Dream’ combined with the perception that there is a strong desire for the ‘Great Outdoors’ in relation to the house and Australians is, of course, open to challenge. One of the tasks of this thesis is to consider representations of the house in Australian fiction that deviate from the idea that all Australians, firstly, long to own a house and secondly, require it to have ready access to the landscape.

Phillipa Tristram has also provided a study of the house. She does so in relation to British literature, utilising the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy among others. She argues that the house in fiction has a subconscious as

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17 Rudd. ‘Australia in Focus’, (accessed online 30/05/08).
well as a conscious being. Tristram illustrates this argument by pointing out the symbolism of the house in relation to marriage in Victorian novels, so that, for example, the idea of a comfortable home was equated with a comfortable marriage. Patrick White takes up this symbolism in the novel, *The Tree of Man*, where a rose planted against the house by Amy Parker symbolises her dream house. In *Cloudstreet*, the unconscious is dramatised by the way in which the house retains its ghosts. Fish, who has a strong relationship to the library where the ghost resides, operates on a different psychic level to the other characters. He is between worlds in the same way as the ghost of the Aboriginal girl who died in the library.

Other scholars have considered the representation of houses in literature. Eve Ellen Frank in *Literary Architecture*, builds a history of connections between architecture, author and literature in her examination of the writings of Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marcel Proust and Henry James. Frances Premoli-Droulers also articulates the significance of the connections between house and author in *Writers’ Houses*:

> Houses play an all-important role in the lives of writers, bringing order to their memories, calming their fears, stimulating their ideas. Often it is within walls that the artistic imagination really takes off and soars to the furthest reaches of creativity.

The idea that there is a connection between author, text and architecture is a common thread in the works of Frank, Chandler and Tristram. All three writers point, for example, to the use of architectural language in literature, in phrases such as the ‘structure’ of the text and the ‘building of a story’. Sometimes the

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19 Patrick White. (1956), *The Tree of Man*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, see for example, p. 43.
materiality of a house that an author has experienced has a direct relationship to the
text. *Cloudstreet* is an example where the writer’s connection to a house enters his
novel. The library in the house on Cloud Street has its genesis in a library that
Winton spent time in as a child. 22

The seminal study of the house represented in fiction is Gaston Bachelard’s *The
Poetics of Space*, which deftly and comprehensively examines the meanings
attached to the house image. Despite his recognition of the diversity of domestic
spaces, Bachelard chooses to consider the more benign aspects of the house. His
study centres on what he refers to as the ‘houses we love.’23 He recognises only
those roles of the house that act as a comfort to the dweller. Bachelard states that
the chief function of the house is to ‘shelter daydreaming’, an activity intimately
connected to the subconscious and to what he terms the ‘soul’, all those immaterial
things held in high regard by each individual. (p. 6) Bachelard’s argument refers to
the capacity of the house to act as our primary shelter, a place so familiar and
reassuring that we feel sufficiently secure to relax and fantasise. Bachelard’s idea of
the house as a ‘nest’ for daydreaming is prevalent in fiction. It is evidenced, for
example, in *Cloudstreet* where Rose finds ‘a room with a window overlooking the
street, an *Anne of Green Gables* room.’(p. 38) And for Derek Bradley in *The
Memory Room*:

Looking at illustrations in his childhood books, he had often singled out
images of peace and dwelt on them. In one of these pictures, a gabled house
with dormer windows, set on an empty hill (a house that was merely
portrayed as a background to the story unfolding in the foreground, and not
intended to be significant), took on a special meaning and attractiveness for
him: he returned to it many times, wanting to enter the picture and to find

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23 Bachelard. p. xxxvi.
perfect happiness there on the quiet hillside. Some day, he would tell himself, he would own a house like that. (p. 16)

Drawing on the work of Bachelard and other scholars who examine the literary house, this thesis tests the hypotheses that a majority of the contemporary Australian literary houses will reflect firstly, the sense of a connection between outdoor and indoor spaces as Bruce Bennett suggests and secondly, a sense of the makeshift as Elizabeth Ferrier suggests. Furthermore, I will examine whether representations of gender and Aboriginality are likely to be reconfigured through the trope of the house in contemporary fiction.

Postcolonial discussion in relation to the Australian house tends to be based on consideration of the land on which the house is placed with some scholars such as Jennifer Rutherford and David Crouch asserting that there is an underlying tension connected to the house because all Australian houses are built on land that is stolen from Aboriginal people. This thesis will examine these arguments through a consideration of the notions of settlement and shelter. Elizabeth Ferrier points out that many discussions centre on the land but few consider the house. This is the case with postcolonial discussion of the Australian house and this thesis addresses this significant lack.

The term ‘Australian fiction’ can itself be considered contentious in postcolonial

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26 Rutherford, p. 113
27 Crouch, p. 43
28 Ferrier, p. 40.
studies. Graham Huggan takes up this argument in his text, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*. He states that: ‘Here, it seems reasonable to expect that an Australian passport should be the minimum requirement for the eligibility as an Australian writer.’\(^{29}\) He goes on to qualify that criterion by including those authors who have dual or changing citizenship. In this thesis, Australian fiction is taken to mean fiction that is written by authors who consider themselves to be, at least in part, Australian. The term ‘contemporary’ relates to novels that have been published in the last twenty-five years.

In relation to the conceptualisation of houses in Australian novels, Jennifer Rutherford points out that Bachelard’s ‘felicitous’ houses are only one part of the story of the house in Australian fiction:

> It is not possible to read Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* without shadow-houses flickering into view. When Bachelard writes that the house is a space that is valued, defended and in turn defends the self against adverse forces, the infelicitous houses of Australian literature come to mind.\(^{30}\)

Some of the houses in this thesis conform to Rutherford’s notion of ‘shadow-houses’. In particular, the childhood homes of Erika in *The Memory Room* and Vic in *The Great World* could be described in this way as they fail to provide psychological shelter for their young occupants. On the whole, however the majority of houses are sheltering spaces and that is their main value to their occupants. The houses in the texts chosen here for detailed consideration are diverse. They shelter and threaten: they are cherished and abandoned. Often they


give a sense of permanence, but they are also frequently described as fragile or makeshift. They are diverse in both physical structure and character. They are also capable of imposing their own meanings on their occupants. A detailed introduction of the texts will provide a sense of the houses, the characters that inhabit them, and the settings in which they are placed.

The method employed in this thesis has been to select a set of contemporary Australian novels in which houses play a significant role and to compare these novels according to a number of questions and qualities. The novels that form the basis of this thesis are: *The Great World*, (1990) by David Malouf, Kim Scott’s *Benang* (1991), Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, (1991) Brenda Walker’s *Crush*, (1991) Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*, (1994), Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006), Christoper Koch’s *The Memory Room* (2007) and Charlotte Wood’s *The Children* (2007). These particular novels have been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, each text utilises the house image in a different way to explore various themes, such as family relationships and conflicts, in the case of *Crush, The Children* and *Cloudstreet*, friendship and obsession in the case of *The Memory Room*, belonging in the case of *The Great World*, and land rights, Aboriginal dispossession and poverty in the case of *Benang, The White Earth* and *Carpentaria*. Secondly, the locations featured in the texts span the width of Australia from Hobart to Perth and encompass both rural, suburban and urban settings. Thirdly, the novels have all been successful, winning awards over time such as the Miles Franklin in the case of *Benang* (2000), *Carpentaria* (2007), *The White Earth* (2005), *The Great World* (1991) and *Cloudstreet* (1992). The TAG Hungerford award was conferred on *Crush* (1991). *The Memory Room* (2007), while less successful in terms of awards
than Koch’s previous novels, was long listed for The Miles Franklin Award in 2007. The novels have also been chosen because they represent different eras. *Benang*, for example, spans the 1930s through to the present while *Cloudstreet* spans the late 1940s to the 1960s. *The Memory Room* is set in the 1970s and 1980s while *The Great World* spans the 1940s to the 1980s. *Crush* is set in the 1980s while *The Children* and *Carpentaria* are set in contemporary timeframes. The core novels were chosen to constitute a variety of houses with different settings in various eras as well as narratives about characters that were diverse in terms of social status, motivations and desires. The fact that the houses were set in different timeframes, on one hand, potentially made it more difficult to draw conclusions about literary ideas of the contemporary house. However, selecting novels that, taken together, situated characters in a variety of eras meant that the thesis was able to explore ideas of the house over time, bearing in mind the fact that those earlier time settings were imagined from a contemporary perspective.

The novels also represent a diversity of focus in that some are regional novels, some are national and others are transnational. Contemporary Australian works of fiction have been chosen because they might best illustrate a current Australian conception of the house. In acknowledgement of the fact that other novels might have proved suitable for consideration, many texts have been referred to in arguments made in this thesis. These include some novels from before this contemporary period and some novels published after the commencement of the thesis such as Christos Tsolkias’ *The Slap* (2010), Michelle De Kretser’s *Questions of Travel* (2012) and Favel Parett’s *Past The Shallows* (2012). The method adopted in this thesis was to select a set of contemporary novels for extensive study and
The main advantage of this method was in being able to use a stable group of texts for repeated analysis from differing perspectives. This core set of texts was supplemented by considerations of houses in other contemporary Australian novels so as to point to the wider field of Australian fiction both contemporary and historical.

One of the Australian novels to be considered in this thesis is *The White Earth* which is set in rural Queensland around the time of the Mabo decision. It tells the story of an embittered elderly station owner, John McIvor, his desire for an heir to his land in the Darling Downs, and his need to maintain secrecy in relation to an Aboriginal massacre that occurred there in the past and in which his father was involved. McIvor finds what he hopes is a likely heir in William, a nephew whose father has recently been killed in a farming accident when his harvester caught fire. He provides a home of sorts to William and his mother on his property. Along with McIvor’s gruff housekeeper the characters occupy the dilapidated Kuran House. William battles a tumour in his ear, which goes unnoticed by the adults he lives with and which culminates in hallucination and collapse at the time of McIvor’s hosting of an anti-land rights rally on the property. Ruth, McIvor’s daughter, returns to the property to contest her father’s intentions in relation to the inheritance of Kuran House. At the culmination of the novel, McIvor tries to eradicate evidence of the Aboriginal massacre by burning the recovered bones of its victims. Kuran House burns to the ground as a consequence of this attempt to conceal the terrible history of the property. At the conclusion of the narrative the question of rightful ownership of the land remains contentious. This is summed up in the statement by
Ruth that the land was ‘fifteen thousand acres of prime real grazing country. In this world, something like that wasn’t just given back. It had to be fought for.’ (p. 375)

Kuran House is the main house in the novel *The White Earth*. It is a large two-storey settler mansion in the Darling Downs that has at one time been a grand residence but has now fallen into disrepair. It has been divided into flats with partitions at some point and many of the more beautiful architectural features have been removed. The sense of decay in relation to Kuran House is palpable. The entire second storey is unstable. Visitors are not encouraged to go there and normally only ascend to this floor if summoned by the patriarch, John McIvor, who occupies a bedroom on that level. The house’s importance is emphasised in the text by the use of a capital ‘H’. Kuran House symbolises possession and prestige for John McIvor. It is connected to stability and security for William and his mother, and for the housekeeper Mrs Griffith. For John’s daughter, Ruth, the house is the symbol of her grievances with her father, who sent her away to a boarding school to protect her, after her father’s friend raped her. Acquisition, property, land rights and possession by force are themes that are explored in this novel using the house as symbol.

*Cloudstreet* is a novel about the lives of two families sharing a large rundown house on the fringe of post-Second World War Perth in Western Australia. The house is haunted by a previous tragedy where a young Aboriginal girl committed suicide in the library of the home. The Pickles family consists of Dolly and Sam and their children Rose, Ted and Chubb. The Lamb family members are Oriel and Lester and their children Quick, Fish, Hat, Red and Lon. Both families have come to Perth
after experiencing disasters in rural Western Australia. The families, however, are quite different. The Lambs parents are industrious and God-fearing where the Pickles are comparatively indolent. Sam Pickles is well meaning but hopelessly undone by his gambling habit. Dolly Pickles provides a contrast to Oriel Lamb in terms of her mothering and sobriety. She is desirous of the kind of excitement she cannot obtain as a wife and mother whereas Oriel’s obsession is with what she calls ‘stickability’, the will to keep going in the face of tragedy. The novel encompasses a period from the late 1940s to the 1960s and tells the story of the two families, their fortunes and misfortunes. Despite the irritations felt by the Pickles family at living so close to the busy and noisy Lamb family they are assisted by that family on two occasions. At one point Lester helps Sam escape some thugs who are hoping to recover Sam’s gambling debt. When Dolly spirals into alcoholism, Oriel temporarily takes on a nurturing role, nursing Dolly and cleaning the side of the house occupied by the Pickles family when Dolly is incapacitated after a drinking binge. The Lamb family have all been affected by the changes in Fish’s personality and capabilities after his near-fatal drowning. This is particularly the case with Quick who becomes obsessed with images of tragedy. The house has a role to play in this melancholy with its sense of palpable misery. Quick abandons it for a rural life as a kangaroo shooter. On his return to Cloud Street, Quick develops a relationship with Rose Pickles. The two families are gradually drawn closer together through their shared lives in the Cloud Street house. This is particularly the case after Rose and Quick marry and have a child. At the conclusion of the novel the two families gather at the Swan River to celebrate life in the Cloud Street house. At the picnic Fish enters the river and drowns achieving his desire to reunite with the water.
The *Cloudstreet* house is a white weatherboard two-storey property divided down its centre to accommodate the two separate families. Like the mansion in *The White Earth*, the Cloud Street house has fallen into disrepair. The weatherboards are peeling and the windows are buckling. The division of the house, at one level, has a symbolic meaning as well as a physical one: it represents the initial incompatibility of the two families. Yet, the house also exercises agency in Winton’s novel. It is capable of imposing its own meaning on the residents. The library is the centre of the house with its lack of windows, its pungent air and its sense of menace. The library also represents the past. It is a space in which a young Aboriginal girl committed suicide after experiencing the trauma of separation from her family. Furthermore, it is a space that particularly attracts Fish. The Cloud Street house contrasts with the modern home being built by Rose and Quick, a home they eventually decide not to occupy. Their choice to remain in the Cloud Street house sees them opening up a window in the library to let the light in, symbolically as well as physically allowing the ghost of the Aboriginal girl to leave. The principal other ‘house’ in the novel is actually a tent in the backyard occupied by Oriel after she feels that the Cloud Street house is rejecting her. The tent reflects Oriel’s personality. It is spare and neat and provides a secluded place for religious contemplation.

In Christopher Koch’s *The Memory Room*, Derek Bradley returns to his childhood suburb in New Town at the request of his friend Vincent Austin. Vincent has left Derek in charge of his papers and diaries, which reveal his life as a spy and his intense relationship with Erika Lange. Vincent and Derek developed a friendship
during their time at university in Tasmania. Vincent has a separate friendship with Erika Lange, which began during their adolescence in suburban Tasmania. The friendship between Erika and Vincent is so close that they consider themselves to be ‘twins’. Erika’s relationship with her obsessive father, however, creates a sense of fragility in her. The three characters meet up in China where Vincent and Derek are engaged by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Derek begins a sexual relationship with Erika, which is doomed to failure because of her instability. Erika ends the relationship with Derek after he proposes marriage. After an unsuccessful attempt to assist the Chinese scholar Professor Liu and his wife to defect to Australia, Vincent is disgraced. Each character returns to Australia and takes up residence in Canberra. Erika gains work as a television anchor, while Derek and Vincent return to the Department of Foreign Affairs. Erika commences an intense relationship with Peter Rykov, who works ostensibly as a reporter for a Russian newspaper. Vincent suspects that Rykov is a spy and at a meeting of the two Rykov divulges his intention to return to Russia. His departure devastates Erika and she commits suicide. At the conclusion of the novel Vincent has purposefully ‘gone missing’ after asking Derek to access and then dispose of his papers and personal diaries. Derek takes on the role of witness to Vincent’s relationship with Erika and his life as a spy.

In all, there are five Australian houses of particular interest in Koch’s novel. Vincent’s home in suburban Tasmania, the apartment of the Lius in China, the Canberra house Vincent occupies after he returns from China, Erika’s house in Canberra and the house of her childhood in Lutana, Tasmania. Unlike the houses in *The White Earth* and *Cloudstreet*, there is no sense of the makeshift in Koch’s
house images. The house in New Town that Vincent occupies, for example, as an adolescent, is a solid two-storey abode with an enclosed verandah that Vincent uses as his study and living area. Erika’s house in Canberra is similarly substantial. There is, however, a sense of isolation in Koch’s depictions of houses, particularly those in Tasmania and Canberra. These houses are a contrast to the cramped and basic apartment of Professor Liu and his wife. The living spaces in *The Memory Room* are central to the narrative. The house in New Town, for example, with its secret room allows Vincent and Erika to pursue a secretive life. Erika’s childhood home in Lutana is seen as a type of foreign fairytale house that mirrors her German heritage and her ethereal aspect. Derek, on the other hand, is as solid and steady as his home in Tasmania.

There are two significant houses in Charlotte Wood’s *The Children*. The first is the suburban family home in which the children have grown up and where the father, Geoff, has his accident. Its significance lies in the fact that it is a typical Australian suburban domestic space, solid and ordinary yet momentarily dangerous. The ‘children’ return as adults to the home following their father’s hospitalisation after a fall from the roof. Wood focuses on the relationship of the characters to the house. Stephen’s reaction to the house of his childhood, for example, is tempered by his experience of being thrown out of it by his father as a teenager. The trauma that his sister Mandy has undergone as an overseas journalist in war-torn countries is revealed in the images of terrible events that she momentarily confuses with simple items in the house. For example, she mistakes a red bracelet for a pool of blood. (p. 35) The house is connected to the larger world in a way that the Cloud Street house, Kuran House and the Tasmanian houses in *The Memory Room* are not. The news of
the wider world comes into the house through the radio and television and through Mandy’s experience as an overseas journalist which causes the family to be witnesses, often unwillingly, to the tragedies that play out in overseas countries. On her return to the house, Mandy becomes the obsession of Tony, a hospital worker, who once witnessed a car accident at the same time and place as her. The culmination of the narrative involves Tony approaching Mandy and her family at the hospital where he points a gun at Stephen. At the conclusion of the novel Mandy makes a commitment to witness to the ordinary things of life as well as the extraordinary. The second house of significance in Wood’s novel is one in Sarajevo where Mandy and her work companion Luke spend the night. It contrasts with Mandy and Stephen’s home in Australia in terms of its small size and the relative poverty of its occupant. Its significance lies in this contrast to Australian houses in the novel.

The house in Brenda Walker’s Crush operates as a physical structure but also as a symbolic space with its dark cellar which represents the unconscious of the two protagonists, Tom and Anna, and their relationship. This is a house very much set in its community. As such, it contrasts directly with the house in The Memory Room in Newtown, which seems isolated despite being in a suburban area close to the city. Walker’s houses and flats in inner-city Perth are sheltering and yet connected to the world outside. A sense of the makeshift is also in evidence. The roof, for example, is ‘sitting on top of the house with no internal support, like a hat.’(p. 24) Crush is a parodic treatment of the detective story, but it also comments on fatherhood, family dynamics, city life and corporate greed. Anna occupies the
closed-in verandah at the front of Tom’s North Perth home in a manner that makes her liminally connected to him.

David Malouf’s *The Great World* depicts four main houses. The first is the simple childhood home of Digger and Jenny set in a semi-rural location outside Sydney: the second home is Vic’s rural childhood home and the third is the suburban house where Vic lives with the Warrender family after the death of his parents. The fourth house is in a suburb of Sydney and is the home of Iris, the sister of Digger’s friend Mac. Vic’s childhood house stands out for its insubstantiality. The fragile house is built on the dunes and Vic fears the sand will swallow it up which it eventually does. The Warrender house, in contrast is a more stable environment for Vic. *The Great World* tells the story of Digger and Vic who share a complex friendship. Malouf celebrates the house in this novel, particularly the kitchen. It is the male characters who eulogise domestic space. This provides a sharp contrast to Mrs. Keen’s relationship to the house. She initially takes pains to create a home in the house at Keen’s Crossing, but eventually abandons it, sitting outside in a chair and refusing to go back inside. These two divergent relationships to the house will be considered and contrasted in the thesis.

Kim Scott’s *Benang* is a narrative about a young Aboriginal man in search of his history. Harley who goes to live with his grandfather, Ern a eugenicist, discovers his grandfather’s papers and photographs that confirm his agenda. The narrative chronicles the lives of both Harley and his relatives. It is a powerful portrayal of Noongar history in the South-West of Western Australia that uses imagined documents, which have their basis in actual history, to comment on the treatment of
Indigenous South-Western Australians. The houses in the novel vary from those occupied by European Australians to those of Harley’s extended family. One house, in particular, the house of Harley’s great-uncle Jack Chatalong symbolises the conditions under which Aboriginal people of the South West were treated by government bureaucracy. The house is built by Jack and is called a ‘secret’ home because he realises that his control over it is dependent on not attracting negative attention from government officials. Once discovered, Jack is ordered to dismantle it and re-erect it on a reserve. These mini-narratives are woven together with the story of Harley’s search for his roots. The novel concludes with Harley’s reconciliation with his living relatives.

Number One House in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* is similar to Jack Chatalong’s house in that it is built by the owner, Angel Day, from discarded materials. It is also subject to both bureaucratic approval and, contrarily, disapproval. Despite the fact that the house is described as ramshackle and ‘an igloo built of rubbish’ it provides shelter for the family, partly because it exudes its own sense of menace and thus keeps interfering white people from entering it.\(^{31}\) *Carpentaria* is a complex weaving of narratives about Angel, her partner Normal, their children and their lives in the Aboriginal fringe camp on the edge of Uptown, known as Pricklebush. It chronicles their battles with the local council, the police and their rivals the Eastend mob. The narrative culminates in a hurricane that demolishes Desperance which includes both Uptown, Pricklebush and Eastend. The practicality of self-built houses made from discarded rubbish is revealed when Normal Phantom vows to re-build in the aftermath of the cyclone.

\(^{31}\) Alexis Wright. p. 15.
This thesis diverges from the stance taken by Bachelard in which he concentrates on emotionally appealing house images. The Australian novels chosen for consideration here reflect a diversity of houses and various relationships between domestic space and dweller. Although this thesis draws on Bachelard’s theory of the house in fiction, and considers abodes that do provide a space for ‘daydreaming’, it is complicated by the examination of particular texts in much greater detail and not limiting its focus to houses that are necessarily ‘felicitous’ in nature. Indeed, some of the representations of the house in the novels chosen for examination here signify a sense of imprisonment, menace or the makeshift and these aspects of the house image will also be explored.

Susan Strehle has questioned the practice of single-nation studies of literature, firstly, because such scholarship tends to privilege particular nations and secondly, because it neglects commonalities across different countries. She contends that, ‘the time has come to think globally about literature.’32 Whilst acknowledging the potential deficiencies of a single-nation study of the house image in fiction, this thesis maintains that the physicality of ‘house’ as opposed to ‘home’ means that national peculiarities are likely. A house in an Australian suburb, for example, is likely to demonstrate particular physical characteristics. Similarly, an Australian urban dwelling, such as the one in Crush may be larger and placed on a greater area of land than one in an area in another country where land is more limited and/or

32 Strehle. p.4.
more expensive. The area of the house and land around it could be linked to ideas of privacy, shelter and wealth. This is the case in both *The Memory Room* where an apartment in Peking is contrasted with Australian houses, and in *The Children* where the Sarajevo apartment contrasts with a suburban Australian house.

In Australian literary studies there has been no comprehensive examination of the house in Australian fiction, although there have been some articles written on the subject. Russell McDougall’s article, ‘Sprawl and the Vertical’, examines Australian fictional representations of the house, referring to Robin Boyd’s statement that the essential Australian house is placed horizontally on the earth rather than rising up as a ‘vertical being.’ McDougall states that Australian literature and architecture both tend to ‘sprawl’. Although I would argue that the narratives in this thesis do not sprawl as McDougall suggests, the structure of the Australian house is important because houses represented in Australian fiction have their genesis in the vernacular Australian house. For example, many of the houses in the texts of this thesis feature a verandah. Similarly, the houses often share their sense of being somewhat makeshift with the vernacular Australian house. This is an argument that will be developed in the first chapter of this thesis. Delys Bird, like McDougall, has written about the Australian house. She considers its abandonment by women in her article, “‘Mother I won’t never go drovin’’: Motherhood in

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34 Robin Boyd. (1952), *Australia’s Home*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1968, states that Australian houses have traditionally been single storey homes (p. 20), whereas Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* contends that we imagine the house as a ‘vertical’ being’. (p. 17)

Australian narrative. The representation of characters abruptly leaving the house is evidenced in most of the novels and will be considered in depth in Chapter Three. This thesis contrasts with the arguments of these two scholars in relation to the depth of consideration given to these ideas and the way the structure of the house and its abandonment are tied to the concept of shelter.

Of the few scholars who have examined the house image in Australian fiction, perhaps the most illuminating is Elizabeth Ferrier. Her article ‘From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts: Architectural metaphors in recent Australian Fiction’ looks at the metaphorical meanings of the house image and what these convey in terms of the Australian culture. (p. 46) She argues that the house image in the fiction of writers such as Malouf, Jolley, Carey and White all demonstrate the ‘failure of the quest for a fixed and unified cultural tradition.’ The house images in the works of these authors, according to Ferrier, convey a sense of fragmentation, disintegration, a resistance to confinement and an allowance for differences and contradictions. (p. 52-53) Ferrier also argues that in Australian fiction, characters tend to abandon the house completely. (p. 46) This argument, while similar to that of Delys Bird in relation to the abandonment of the house, allows for both men and women to leave the house. Abandonment and a related issue of claustrophobia are brought together as themes in this thesis and considered from the perspective of both women and men.

More recently, Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway have edited a collection

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of peculiarly Australian responses to Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* in the text, *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*. Their text covers a wide range of responses however, only one chapter, written by Rutherford, considers the Australian house as a poetic space. In ‘Undwelling: Or Reading Bachelard in Australia’ Rutherford questions the notion of Bachelard’s felicitous houses in connection with Australian living spaces.\(^{37}\) However, her concern is with the ‘unhoused’ rather than the sheltered subject and as such provides a point of departure from the concerns of this thesis. Rutherford argues that taking Bachelard’s theory of poetic space and relating it to an Australian experience of the house is somewhat redundant because it misses ‘the crucial leap that Australian cultural producers and theorists have made from universalising theories and derivative practices into a local poetics cognisant of a history of cross-cultural misdialogue, mistranslation, and misappropriation.’ (p. 115) This thesis maintains an awareness of these advances on Bachelard’s theories in the context of an Australian poetics of space, particularly in relation to the work of Jennifer Rutherford, David Crouch, Paul Carter and Uli Krahn, who maintain that the house in Australia is connected to guilt about the dispossession of Aboriginal people. However, it recognises that some of the novels of this thesis, specifically, do not engage with a consideration of the history of Aboriginal unhousing in relation to their imagining of the Australian house. *The Memory Room* and *The Children* are examples here. It is also the contention of this thesis that there is much ground to cover in relation to Bachelard’s ‘housed’ and sheltered White subjects in relation to contemporary Australian literature. Still others, such as *Cloudstreet* and *The White Earth* interpret Australia’s ‘housing’ and ‘unhousing’ in the context of both white

\(^{37}\) Rutherford. p. 113
and Aboriginal history.

Bruce Bennett has also contributed to the scholarship on the representation of the house in Australian fiction. In his essay, ‘Living spaces: Some Australian houses of childhood’, he is in agreement with Ferrier, stating that a sense of ‘fragile insubstantiality’ is a common characteristic of the house in Australian fiction.\(^\text{38}\)

Bennett also argues that representations of the house in Australian fiction normally have a sense of the landscape around them. He argues that ‘access to a vivid natural world outdoors’ is a characteristic of the ideal of the house as imagined by Australian writers such as Tim Winton and Les Murray.\(^\text{39}\) Drawing on this scholarship but with a view to ascertaining a sharper sense of the function of the house in contemporary Australian fiction, this thesis hypothesises that a majority of the houses will reflect what Bennett sees as a relationship between the interior and the exterior and, secondly, a sense of fragility and that these ideas will relate to popular Australian myths of the house. However, the thesis expands on the work of Bruce Bennett, particularly in relation to myth, to examine the house image in relation to gender, racism, poverty, shelter, myth and the sense in which Australia sees itself as part of the world.

Both Elizabeth Ferrier and Bruce Bennett have called for a more extensive study of the representation of the house in Australian fiction. They suggest that research in this area would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Australian cultural identity. The aim of this thesis is to examine contemporary representations


\(^{39}\) Bennett. p. 11.
of the house in Australian fiction in order to illuminate the ethos of domestic space and the impact that commonly held perceptions in Australia of changing housing conditions and structures have on the imagined houses in contemporary Australian fiction.

Although the focus of this thesis is contemporary it is important in this introduction to briefly consider the house image in the history of fiction in this nation. This type of examination reveals certain continuities between cultural perceptions of Australian houses and their representation in fiction. White’s novel *The Tree of Man*, for example, was written in the same time period as Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*. Both these texts display an attitude of contempt for Australian domestic space, particularly that of the suburbs. Bennett points out that at the time when these texts were published, ‘Australian suburbia was under attack.’ Katharine Susannah Prichard imagines the house as a burden as does Jessica Anderson. Ruth Park and Helen Garner on the other hand represent the house’s capacity to shelter traditional and new configurations of families. Works by each of these writers will be considered.

Katharine Susannah Prichard’s novel *Intimate Strangers*, written in 1937, and set in the Depression, is the story of the troubled marriage between Elodie and Greg. The narrative describes several different houses, including Greg and Elodie’s holiday cottage, ‘Ywurrie’ as well as their family home, the homestead ‘Eendracht’ and the hut of the fisherman Prospero. One of the major themes of the narrative

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41 Bennett, p. 6.
derives from the financial and psychological strain of maintaining a domestic house.

She had carried the house like a shell on her back. It would be strange to be free of it, its four rooms, the sleepout and this verandah with the shabby creepers trailing about it. Small exacting home. It clung and devoured them with rates, taxes, insurance, demands for repairs, odds and ends of improvements.43

*Intimate Strangers* romanticises the notion of deserting the house and living on a boat or in a hut.44 As we have seen, Winton’s novel *Cloudstreet* contains a more contemporary example of a romanticised desertion of the house, from the perspective of the character, Oriel, who pitches a tent in the backyard rather than live in the house. The reasons for Oriel’s retreat to the tent are not linked to her financial position but it does speak to the idea of women’s independence, a theme common to portrayals of women in the late twentieth century.

Ruth Park’s 1948 novel, *The Harp in the South*, like Prichard’s text, is set in a significant period of social change in Australia, when housing was in short supply and demand strong.45 The novel, which tells the story of the inhabitants of an ‘unlucky’ house in inner Sydney, like Prichard’s text, also has a realist mode. *The Harp in The South*, however, does not suggest abandoning the home; rather it celebrates the house despite its acknowledged shortcomings. There are parallels between Park’s inner Sydney house and Winton’s suburban Perth house in *Cloudstreet*. In both texts, the residents grow used to the faults of the ramshackle house and this aids its sense of being a home. Roie and Charlie, characters in Park’s

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43 Prichard. p. 351

44 In *Intimate Strangers*, the main character, Elodie, describes a hut where her friend Prospero lives as enjoyably secluded, cool, clean and attractive, p.145.

novel, contemplate the room in the house that is to be theirs: ‘A stranger in this attic room would have withered and died with the sheer ugliness and sordidness and despair of it; but to Roie and Charlie it was a room of their own.’ (p. 184) Similar sentiments are expressed by Quick and Rose who have the opportunity to move into a modern house of their own and choose to stay on at Cloud Street because they feel that they belong there. Both novels speak to the myth of the Australian character as being resourceful and having the capacity to ‘make-do’.

Patrick White’s novel, *The Tree of Man*, first published in 1956, begins at the turn of the century in rural Australia. It is the story of Stan Parker and his wife Amy establishing a home and family in a rural area of New South Wales. The narrative concerns Stan’s quest for spiritual enlightenment. The family home in this narrative is far more accommodating than the run-down houses in the novels of Park and Winton. The house, which is described as ‘ordinary but real’, is as unpretentious and honest as its owner, Stan Parker. However, the Parker house lacks the charm of those depicted by Prichard, Park and Winton. There is little sense in White’s novel that the house is to be celebrated. Rather, White portrays the house as spiritually confining. Spirituality is always, in Stan’s case, to be found outside the house. Amy, who strives, at times, to understand and possibly join her husband in his spiritual quest, seems trapped inside the house with its domestic concerns. White satirises Australian suburban life in *The Tree of Man* through his depictions of houses and their interiors. His descriptions of houses other than the Parkers’ are unflattering and couched in irony. He points out the discrepancy between the dreams of the householders and the realities of suburban domestic life, between the

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dream of an aesthetically pleasing house and the ugliness of the actual place. His houses are, for example, luridly coloured, ‘Deep purple, clinker blue, ox blood and public lavatory’. (p.394) This type of distaste for the domestic is particularly reflected in White’s descriptions of suburban houses and practices. White attaches a sense of pretension to the interiors of suburban houses and credits Thelma and Amy with superficiality in relation to their interest in and admiration for such things.

The Goughs lived in a better suburb, though not the best, with quantities of shining furniture, including a smokers’-table-cum-drink-cabinet, that you approached on all fours to fish out a bottle of banana cocktail. (p. 253)

This ironical treatment of suburbia and the Australian attachment to house gained favour in the late 1950s and has become a common source of material reflected in the work of comedians such as Barry Humphries with his character Edna Everage.47

Helen Garner’s *Monkey Grip*, first published in 1977, has a very different representation of the house. The inner-city Melbourne houses that provide the setting for this narrative are not cherished ‘castles’. Nora’s house, for example, has a ‘bomb-site of a back yard.’48 One of the most important aspects of the representation of house in *Monkey Grip* is its depiction of shared housing. Although novels such as *Harp in the South* also centred on shared housing, Garner’s novel created a sense that this living arrangement could be a ‘normal’ choice rather than an eccentric or economic one. It was also groundbreaking, according to Brenda Walker, at the time of its publication, for the way in which its descriptions of

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47 See for example, Barry Humphries. *Dame Edna’s Coffee Table Book*, Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1977, which has a photograph of ‘A typical suburban Australian woman having a nervous breakdown.’ p. 35.
Australian families departed from the stereotype of the nuclear family. Walker’s *Crush* is similar to *Monkey Grip* in its portrayal of diverse Australian families and their dwellings.

In Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra by the River*, published in 1978, there are several houses. One house, in particular, is represented in much the same terms as those of White and Humphries. Nora, as a young bride, lives with her husband and her mother-in-law in their stifling suburban dwelling where the evening entertainment is the wireless with three chairs grouped around it. The house is a prison and Nora dreams of escape. The capacity to restrain and enclose is also evidenced in the house of Nora’s childhood. Nora describes it as ‘a heavy wooden box stuck twelve feet in the air on posts.’ However, Nora, on her return, finds a solution to the confinement of the house by occupying the place her sister had created, the verandah:

I sleep in Grace’s glass room, and whenever I rise to draw the blinds against the moonlight, I am enthralled by the brilliance of the scene, the soft yet sharp delineation of the grass, the nasturtium leaves like floating silvery discs, and the weight and mystery of the black shadows. (p. 137)

Nora’s ability to resolve her feelings of the confinement in the ‘house’ is tied to the outdoors. This is an example of Bennett’s argument that the ideal house image in Australian fiction accesses the outside world, but it also speaks to the growing confidence in Australian society that women could access choice in their living spaces.

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49 Brenda Walker. conversation with author, (24th February 2007).
51 Anderson. p. 3.
This necessarily brief consideration of historical representations of the house in fiction points to a complex relationship between character and house in Australian fiction. The house is presented as confining and stifling, a space to escape from as Ferrier suggests, or idyllically linked to the landscape as Bennett suggests. Alternatively, the house is seen as sheltering and nurturing despite its cosmetic appearance. The work of this thesis is to examine contemporary texts for their sense of shelter or lack of it and to consider the role of gender in attachment to the house. The thesis will also examine notions of the house as space and in particular as a part of the world outside Australia. Furthermore, the thesis will consider Indigenous portrayals of the house. In the light of Gillian Whitlock’s statement that, ‘generally in literature houses are symbolically linked with cultural identity and the social order’, this examination of contemporary texts explores Australian perceptions of and relationships to the house through its representation in contemporary fiction.52 There are several questions that will be addressed here. Do contemporary texts reflect Bruce Bennett’s ideas of the linking of the exterior and interior in Australian houses or Elizabeth Ferrier’s assertions that in the texts of Australian authors the house is often abandoned altogether? How do these texts treat gender and Indigeneity in relation to domestic space? How do Australian writers conceive of domesticity, community and the rest of the world?

This thesis will proceed thematically in its pursuit of these questions. Chapter One, ‘The House as Shelter’ will utilise Bachelard’s concept of the house as a shelter or ‘nest’ for daydreaming to consider representations of benign and comforting

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domestic space in contemporary Australian fiction. The chapter will examine the specific ways in which Australian houses in fiction physically and psychologically shelter their occupants. As noted, Bruce Bennett and Elizabeth Ferrier both allude to the idea of ‘fragility’ or insubstantiality in representations of the house image in Australian fiction. This chapter will examine six texts that form the focus of this thesis, from the perspective of the physical structure and the degree of makeshift construction in domestic structures that occur in the texts. The chapter will ask how such constructions shelter its occupants.

Next, in Chapter Two, *Benang* and *Carpentaria* will be examined. It is important to treat these novels separately as they demonstrate particular notions of dwelling that are not relevant in the other novels. The politics of domestic space are central in both these texts. Ideas of fragility and shelter, spirituality, political aspects of dwelling and gender issues will be considered in this chapter. The differences between the representations of houses in both novels will also be addressed as Wanyi and Noongar cultures are quite different.

Chapter Three will focus firstly, on the representation of women’s relationships to domestic space in the texts of this thesis considering, in particular, the way in which abandonment of the house affects the representation of female characters. The chapter will also consider the relationship of men to domestic space. This is an important theme, for example, in David Malouf’s novel *The Great World* where the main characters, Digger and Vic, both seek out the comfort of the house. This is also evidenced in *The Memory Room* where the main character Vincent is strongly drawn to the domestic life in the house of his friend, Bradley.
Chapter Four firstly considers the location of the houses in the texts chosen for examination in this thesis. The following questions will be addressed: How is the house placed in relation to the outside space? Do house images convey a sense of the geographical location in which they are situated? The chapter will, secondly, examine the way in which the house is placed in a global context in contemporary Australian fiction. For example, there is no sense that the house in *Cloudstreet* is connected to the rest of the world. It occupies a self-contained space, whereas the houses in *The Children* and in *The Memory Room* are linked in the narratives to the world beyond Australia. The chapter will also consider another way in which Australian houses are placed in an Australian context through the attachment of both traditional and new myths to the house. The conclusion of this thesis will utilise the findings of the preceding chapters in order to establish the ways in which house images in contemporary Australian fiction reflect the changing nature of domestic space, family relationships and community and the myths that attach to the house.
Chapter One

The House as Shelter

Gaston Bachelard contends that the house shelters and provides a safe place from the trials of life. He states, ‘Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house.’ Bachelard does not claim that all houses shelter. He points out that his thesis concerns ‘felicitous houses’, those which are pleasant to live in. The idea that the house shelters its occupants might seem obvious, yet, Jennifer Rutherford argues that the house in Australian fiction is as likely not to shelter as it is to provide comfort for the dweller. She suggests that, in contrast to Bachelard’s claim that the house safeguards its occupants there are, ‘shadow-houses flickering into view.’ Rutherford gives examples of colonial texts to substantiate her claims. I argue that in contemporary fiction, the house, no matter how makeshift or fragile, does, in most cases, shelter its occupants. Furthermore, the role of the house has changed so that characters in contemporary Australian fiction are often content to be sheltered

53 Bachelard. p. 7
54 Rutherford. p. 113.
rather than settled in the house. In fact, some characters are settled in the house for long periods of time and some take the idea of being settled in the house for granted.

Many of the houses in the novels of this thesis are makeshift. They have a rough and ready, make-do construction or have been rendered makeshift over time. On occasion, the houses are fragile rather than sturdy. Houses constructed and occupied by Aboriginal characters in the novels *Benang* and *Carpentaria* are always makeshift however those abodes built by Indigenous characters will be discussed more fully in a separate chapter on Indigenous houses because of the specificities of their construction and use. Almost all the houses of non-Indigenous characters are sheltering. The use of the term ‘shelter’ is deliberate. I do not contend that the houses necessarily provide a sense of settlement but they do provide a sense of sanctuary. ‘Settlement’ and ‘shelter’ are terms that are somewhat ambiguous. I use the term ‘shelter’ to suggest a place of temporary sanctuary whereas I use the term ‘settlement’ to imply a more permanent sense of shelter where ties to community are established and the view of dwelling is long-term.

Houses in Australian fiction have their basis in the vernacular architecture of Australia. The house that is represented in the majority of contemporary Australian fiction has its genesis in the European settlement of Australia dating from 1788. Descriptions of shelters built by European settlers in the colonial period provide a foundation for the story of the Australian house. Simple factors such as the limited availability of building tools, skills and raw materials, as well as the psychological state of the newcomers, dictated the way in which colonial homes were constructed.
Historically, Australian houses have often been makeshift because of the circumstances of European settlement in Australia. This trend towards the makeshift is prevalent in houses both in colonial and contemporary Australian fiction.

The vernacular Australian house is a single storey dwelling and this reflects the lack of skills and materials to build a second storey that was prevalent in colonial Australia. Houses tended to occupy only one level and spread outwards rather than upwards. Robin Boyd states that, ‘In pioneer Sydney, the lack of lime, the unsympathetic timber, primitive housekeeping and the unlimited space, combined to make a second storey inconvenient and unnecessary.’ 55 This tendency towards a house of only one storey may account for its prevalence in contemporary Australian fiction. Amongst the many houses in the novels of this thesis only three have a second storey. Another example of the way in which this limited availability of materials and skills affected construction is seen in the form of verandah. The Australian partiality for the verandah, for example, is evidenced in the vernacular architecture as well as in representations of the house in contemporary Australian fiction. The verandah is a relatively uncomplicated structure and one that provides some shelter without necessarily being substantial. It was a simple way to increase the living area of the house but it was also a sheltering space as it provided relief from the heat.

The verandah provides a unique setting in fiction as it is a liminal space, not quite interior and not completely exterior. Fiona Giles points to the popularity of the

verandah as a space for women writers to explore in their prose. 56 Rosa Praed’s short story ‘The Bushman’s Love Story’ contained in Giles’ text opens with the characters in England trying to mentally recreate the Australian verandah.

We were trying to imagine that it was an Australian verandah - the bushman, the Sydney-townsman and I. But it was only a narrow London balcony in which we were sitting – a balcony looking out on a London square so that imagination had set herself a somewhat difficult task. 57

Giles also argues that the verandah in a novel by Rosa Praed titled Lady Bridget In The Never-Never acts as a bridge between private and public worlds. Philip Drew has also explored this idea of the verandah as a liminal space. He states that, ‘the verandah excites a restless feeling. It suggests movement.’ 58 There is a notion of course, that the verandah is a place to sit and watch the world go by therefore it could be argued that the verandah represents stasis, however, sitting and watching the passing parade necessitates a connection to the outside world. The verandah is a space that gives access to the exterior whilst sheltering its occupants. It forms part of the structure of some of the houses in the texts chosen for examination in this thesis. Crush, Cloudstreet, The Great World, The Memory Room and The White Earth all contain houses with this architectural feature. Yet the purpose of the structure has changed somewhat in these contemporary texts. These verandahs no longer access the outside world. In Crush and The Memory Room they are used as living spaces. In The Memory Room, for example, the verandah of the New Town house, which is used as a place of refuge by Vincent, is in no sense a threshold between Vincent’s secret world and the exterior. With its comfortable chairs and electric fire it is enclosed and, at all times, acts to cocoon Vincent. The verandah

has become an intensely private space. In *Crush* the verandah is also enclosed and Anna sets up a shelter and seems comfortable in this place, although it is consciously a temporary abode for her: ‘She hadn’t done much with the room. Just brought in a mattress, a plank desk, a radio, some books and a cardboard box on its side for her clothes’.

In one sense the verandah here acts as a threshold but the border is between that space and the interior of the house and between Tom and Anna. However, in both cases it is a space of shelter. The verandah in *The White Earth*, on the other hand, is the opposite of shelter. It provides no protection for the characters and is so structurally unstable that it is described as ‘ruinous’ and is not used. (p. 16) Similarly, in *Cloudstreet* the verandah is unsafe and not converted to living space. The changing role of this structure and the fact that it is often enclosed points, in the case of the houses in *The Memory Room* and *Crush*, to a contemporary linking of privacy and shelter. In the case of Kuran House in *The White Earth* and the Cloud Street house in Winton’s novel, on the other hand, the changing role of the verandah points to the way in which these houses, over time, have become run-down, makeshift and unnecessary.

Although many of the houses in the novels in this thesis are similar because they are of a single storey and sport a verandah, they are also marked by their individuality. Materials used in construction, for example, vary from wood to tin to stone. The size of the house is also varied. The *Cloudstreet* house and the mansion in *The White Earth* are large two-storey buildings whereas the childhood homes of Vic and Digger in *The Great World* are much more humble constructions. Robin Boyd points to individuality in Australian houses as a significant point of departure.

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from European domestic space. This idea of a diversity of dwellings is particularly evidenced in the novel *Crush*. Walker explores divergent ideas of domesticity and the diversity of family partly through these depictions of different living spaces. There are step-families, multi-generational families, and single parent families. Members of one family occupy a colonial farmhouse while others dwell in a ‘rough tent’ near a service station and ‘draw water from the tap next to the bowsers.’ (p. 32) For Anna, a single room in the Alice Street house constitutes her dwelling space. Yet all these dwelling spaces provide shelter, a sanctuary that might be impermanent, for their occupants.

In terms of physical shelter the houses in many of the novels in this thesis reflect another historical trend in Australian domestic architecture, the makeshift. Boyd points to a lack of availability of materials at times such as the 1850s gold rush.

No matter how hard one worked or how cheap and amenable the hired labour, the shortages of manufactured products persisted. So for many months after occupation houses remained no more than cracked shells, without flooring or ceiling, the unglazed windows boarded over. (p. 37)

One aspect of physical shelter tended to prevail. Expedient shelter was best achieved by less ambitious more makeshift structures.

In his seminal work about Sydney’s first four years of settlement, Watkin Tench praises the temperate climate, the lack of bothersome insects and fauna, as well as the beauty of the flora. Relationships with the Indigenous population were also initially cordial. The perception that there was little to threaten the wellbeing of the settlers must have influenced the psychological sense of shelter felt by the

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60 Robin Boyd. *Australia’s Home*, p. 22.
newcomers, the types of dwellings that were deemed to be necessary to erect and the degree of urgency about their construction. A sense of optimism and purpose as well as the promise of settlement are revealed in the details of Tench’s account of the first four years of European occupation. For example, he evokes some sense of the pride of the newcomers in his statement about the building of the main road in Sydney. ‘The main street of the new town is already begun. It is to be a mile long, and of such breadth as will make Pall-Mall and Portland-Place ‘hide their diminished heads’.

Despite the sense that the occupation of the new land was to be marked by a proud extension of the Mother Country made visible through images of progress such as fine roads, Tench’s account suggests that physical shelter was not an immediate concern of the newcomers to Australia. Tents were erected and these sufficed in the temperate climate of Sydney until other materials became available. The plan to build barracks was hampered by a lack of experience and the perception of what constituted a suitable timber. Tench states that only half the number of anticipated buildings was completed in the projected time frame. He states also that, ‘In the meanwhile the married people, by proceeding on a more contracted scale, were soon under shelter.’ (p. 57) Historian, Bryan Gandevia, describes the first houses built in the colony:

The houses had a roof thatched with reeds or grass (later wooden shingles were made from the she-oak or casuarina tree). Sliding windows were made of sticks, and the doors swung on leather hinges. (p. 12)

This is perhaps the first account of what proved to be a recurring theme in relation to the non-Indigenous and Indigenous history of Australian domestic architecture: shelter tended towards the makeshift.

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61 Watkin Tench. (1833) *Sydney’s First Four Years: Being a Reprint of a Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and a Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, (with an introduction and annotations by L.F. Fitzhardinge), Sydney: Angus and Robertson in association with the Royal Historical Society, 1961, p. 195.
Richard Twopenny’s account, *Town Life in Australia*, written in 1883, also mentions the makeshift nature of dwelling:

By far the majority of houses are built by speculators; which means that they are very badly built, run up in a tremendous hurry, constructed of the cheapest and nastiest materials, with thin walls – in short, built for show, and not for use. 62

Expediency and the limited availability of building materials have dictated the style of Australian domestic shelter at significant times such as during gold rushes in various states and after the two World Wars. This is reflected in houses in Australian fiction such as *Poor Man’s Orange* written by Ruth Park in 1949, at a time of a housing shortage in Sydney. 63 When Roie and Charlie search for accommodation they are shown makeshift dwelling spaces because of this shortage. ‘It was easy to pick out the balcony flat – just a veranda boarded up roughly with asbestos, which had a square cut in it for a window.’ (p. 46) Yet, the sense that the makeshift was simply expedient as well as financially feasible seems to have changed in contemporary texts where the makeshift has become a point of pride in some of the novels. In *Cloudstreet* and *Crush* there is a sense that the makeshift is something that is almost admirable. For example, when Rose Pickles derides the ‘tin bog’ built out of discarded signs in the backyard of the Cloud Street house, Sam proudly replies, ‘Bet you’ve never seen anything like it, Rosebud.’ (p. 45) Although the makeshift construction of the Alice Street house in *Crush* is never openly admired there is a sense that it adds something, perhaps character, to the house.

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In colonial fiction the emphasis is often on the inability of the house to physically shelter its occupants. This inability to shelter is tied to an insubstantial construction. The house in Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’ is just one of many where the domestic space is makeshift and shelter is limited. The permeability of the slab floor of the hut where the drover’s wife and her children dwell is at the heart of the tension of this narrative, because it strongly contributes to her anxiety about the snake that has disappeared under the house.64 The snake in this story symbolises the threat of intrusion. Similarly, Barbara Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ features a slab hut with cracks in its walls that potentially create access for a swagman who is threatening the life of a young wife living on her own.65 These domestic spaces provide a sharp contrast to the contemporary house in Crush. Whereas the makeshift elements of the houses in the colonial stories are the focus of anxieties about safety, in Crush the slab construction of the bathroom has no such sense attached to it. Anna states, in a complacent manner, that the gaps in the slabs would ‘educate the neighbours’ if the room faced the street. (p. 83) The makeshift nature of the room is not a concern for her.

The makeshift house, an abode that is sufficient in the short term, is prevalent in many of the texts in this thesis. It is seen in the Alice Street house in Crush, Vic’s childhood house in The Great World, Jack Chattalong’s house in Benang, Kuran House in The White Earth, Number One House in Carpentaria, parts of the New Town house in The Memory Room and the Cloud Street house. Alongside this makeshift character, houses in contemporary Australian fiction are, sometimes, also

64 Henry Lawson. (1892), The Drover’s Wife and other Classic Stories, Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1994.
fragile. The house in *Cloudstreet* was not initially makeshift. It was a well-constructed two-storey mansion and had a ‘grand air’. Time and neglect however, have damaged the house. Its windows have buckled and its weatherboards are peeling away from the structure like ‘lifted scabs’.\(^{66}\) Sam and Dolly, as well as Oriel and Lester seem content to leave the house as it is so that it has a rough and ready air. The house becomes even more makeshift when it is divided down the middle and made to accommodate two separate families. The kitchen of the Lamb family is one example of the makeshift nature of the house: ‘The Lambs sat around their table on fruit crates and stools eating the food that Oriel cooked on the gas ring by the bucket they had for a sink.’ (p. 52)

Although the New Town house in *The Memory Room* is not makeshift as a whole Vincent eschews the more solid areas of the house, choosing to occupy the closed-in verandah on the second storey where his privacy is assured. This space is decorated with cast-off furniture and roughly divided by unpainted plywood walls:

> All Vincent’s furniture is still here, just as it was: the antique oak desk and office chair inherited from his father, the blackwood table for standing his books and papers; his bookshelves, and even the two wicker chairs that Bradley and he so often sat in as students, talking far into the night. (p. 8)

Despite its makeshift nature the upper storey shelters him completely.

The house in *The White Earth* has been made fragile by neglect and rendered makeshift because of the partitions erected throughout the ground floor. The entire upper story is also fragile and described as unstable. McIvor’s housekeeper warns his nephew to stay away from the area. She states: ‘You stay off those upstairs

verandahs. They’re not safe. You stay away from the upstairs altogether. It’s no place for games.’

Yet the allure of the house remains. The house has, in fact, provided shelter for McIvor despite its fragile and makeshift nature. It even provides a sense of settlement for a long period of time. This is evidenced by the fact that McIvor has ties to the local community that has known both him and his father. While John McIvor struggles to win the approval of his community he does receive the respect of colleagues as the owner of a considerable landholding. McIvor lives in the house for many years and seems unaffected by the house’s disrepair. It has cost him dearly to own the mansion. He has lost his daughter’s approval and his wife has abandoned the house. Neither of these losses, however, seem to bother the old man to any noticeable extent. His desire to keep the house in the family is his reason for bringing his nephew William and William’s mother into the dwelling as his guests. His relationship with William does provide him with happiness as he senses a kindred soul in the young boy. In that sense the house is the catalyst for a sense of comfort because it brings William and his uncle together. The house is the vehicle for McIvor’s relationship with William. It also provides him with a direct link to the land he loves. The comfort of these two emotions increases his sense of being sheltered in the house.

Two areas of the house, in particular, provide the elderly man with shelter. The first is his study. It is the warmest, and one of the most beautiful, rooms in the house with winged leather armchairs situated before a warm hearth and high windows with deep bookshelves in between. (p. 41) The second area is his upstairs bedroom. This room stands in stark contrast to most of the rooms in the house. It is filled with

light and air. It has comfortable areas of seating and grand pieces of furniture. ‘It was as if William had looked into his uncle’s stern heart and found there something delicate and beautiful.’ (p. 152) This is despite the fact that the floorboards are warped and cracks have appeared in the walls. The young boy, William, also sees the house as sheltering despite its coldness, its disrepair and makeshift renovations. He feels that the house is solid and strong, ‘permanent and unchanging’. (p. 117)

William’s childhood home also provides him with a clear sense of shelter despite its insubstantiality. The farmhouse inhabited by William and his parents, until his father’s death, is the ‘centre of his world’. (p. 9) The idea of fragility is turned on its head in this description of the house. A less solid construction is protective according to William’s father who explains that although the house rests on shallow stumps that move and warp this characteristic makes it more durable. William’s father explains that brick houses on concrete slabs are not suitable for the black soil of the area:

‘Those slabs will crack one day,’ he’d insist. ‘And then all those bricks will just crumble. A wooden house is better. It might not look like much, but this old place will never fall down.’ Then he would reach out to caress the crooked door frames fondly, the sleeves of his favourite green jumper all tattered and frayed at the elbows. (p. 8)

The house’s flexibility, attained as a result of its more fragile construction, ensures that it doesn’t crack and crumble like a house made of a more dense and less forgiving material.

Although William’s childhood home is humble it is far more substantial than the childhood house of Vic in the novel The Great World. Vic’s house is the most makeshift and fragile of all the dwelling spaces in the non–Indigenous novels:
The shack they lived in was just one room knocked up out of timber, old packing cases mostly, and patched with fibro and corrugated iron – anything his father had been able to scavenge. (p. 71)

This house, unlike most makeshift domestic spaces in the texts of this thesis, provides only a basic shelter for its occupants and that shelter is precarious. The house is so insubstantial that it is eventually overwhelmed by the nearby sand dunes. The narrator describes Vic’s experience of the sand pouring into the house:

[Then it covered that too and rolled on to push against the windows of the shack and break in and cover the chairs and table and the stiff grey sheets on the beds, and climbed into the teacups high on their hooks, till the whole room was filled to the ceiling and the rafters and roof were covered and there was no sign any more of them or of the life they had lived except in his head.](p. 83)

Regardless of whether or not this movement of the sand is metaphorical, Vic’s sense of not being continually sheltered is clear. Where William’s childhood home physically and emotionally shelters him completely until the death of his father, Vic’s home provides only basic shelter. The overwhelming of the house by sand acts as a metaphor for the lack of emotional shelter provided to Vic within this space. However, in most cases, the insubstantiality of the house in Australian fiction, its humble construction, and sense of the makeshift does not necessarily mean that it is incapable of sheltering its occupants. Some of the most basic houses, such as Digger’s Keen’s Crossing house in The Great World, provide perfect shelter. In relation to Indigenous houses, makeshift Number One House in Carpentaria shelters its occupants until a hurricane destroys it along with the rest of Desperance. A particular notion of shelter operates in imagined Australian houses so that fragile and/or makeshift houses are seen as sheltering.

While many of the houses in the novels are makeshift there are some exceptions to the depiction of fragile or insubstantial houses. For example, the Strathfield home
of the Warrender family in *The Great World* seems to be, largely, a substantial house despite the fact that it is dilapidated in parts. It is described as a large old house with a cast-iron verandah. During his internment as a prisoner of war, Vic is actually sustained by the house.

One image especially kept coming back and back, a kind of waking dream. It was of the house at Strathfield, the hallway just inside the front door, with its high ceiling and pavement of blue, white and terracotta tiles. (p. 169)

The comfort of the domestic and its provision of shelter at its simplest is a theme that Malouf repeats in this novel. Jenny, Digger and Ma Warrender also find the quotidian domestic sustaining. For example, making scones comforts Jenny Keen and Ma Warrender is similarly consoled by the smell of toast. The suburban home of Digger’s girlfriend, Iris, is also a substantial home that provides shelter and comfort for both characters.

The New Town house in *The Memory Room*, like the Warrender house, has substance. It is a two-storey red-brick house with a steep tiled roof, which is described as ‘eternally enclosed by that perfect security which preceded World War One.’ (p. 3) The verandah area of the house is at odds with the rest of it. There is, for example, a strong contrast between Connie’s living space and Vincent’s with Connie’s lounge room seeming to be a solid room. Both parts of the house shelter their occupants perfectly well, however, and this demonstrates the way in which the makeshift can be sheltering. The house in Canberra that Vincent occupies after his return from China is very solid. It is, once again, a place of secrecy and it acts as a fortress that protects Vincent’s obsessive need for privacy. It is a ‘plain two-storeyed brick house with a red-tiled roof, the upper storey rising box-like and domineering above the bungalows on either side.’ (p. 280)
The houses in *The Children* are all substantial and sheltering spaces for most of the characters. Despite Geoff’s fall from the roof, the house has provided settlement for him and his family for most of their lives. Shelter has also been provided for most of the characters. The exceptions here are Mandy and Stephen who have lost a sense that the house is sheltering. In Stephen’s case he has been thrown out of the house by his father and is therefore no longer sheltered in that space and in Mandy’s case occupational trauma has created a sense that she is never safe. She has experienced a sense of loss of psychological shelter as a result. Many of the suburban homes that feature in the novels of this thesis, with the exception of the Alice Street home in *Crush*, have substance, a feeling of solidity, to them. I would argue that this is due, in part, to the sense that the suburbs are relatively benign, conservative and unvarying as they are portrayed in Australian myth. Further, the solidity of the house signals a stable setting for characters such as Vic and Digger, who have experienced trauma. In a similar way Vincent’s New Town house provides a benign space for Erika to retreat from the incestuous attention paid to her by her father.

It is children who are least likely to be sheltered in the house. Erika, for example, in *The Memory Room*, as a young girl, stays out in the rain rather than going home on the first occasion when Vincent meets her. He states, ‘I was concerned to see that she was wet through: her grey gaberdine overcoat was saturated, and her stockings and shoes were splattered with mud.’ (p. 47) Vincent assumes that Erika will return to her home when the rain ceases.
‘I’ll be going home, when there’s a break,’ I said. ‘What about you?’ She looked at me now with a strange expression – almost as if I’d said something offensive. Then she said quickly: ‘I’m not going home. I don’t want to.’ (p. 48)

Erika explains that there will be no-one at home nor was her father there on the previous night. Similarly, in The White Earth, the house provides only basic shelter for William and, at times, it is not a sanctuary. His bedroom, for example, is cold and unwelcoming. The house’s large area contributes to the lack of supervision of William and adults around him largely ignore his health and welfare and he becomes very ill. In this way the house itself acts to move the narrative forward.

As a boy, Vic’s relationship to his benefactor’s family is as fragile as the more dilapidated parts of the house. This is evidenced in passages of the narrative where Vic washes his hands and scrubs his nails on arrival at the home. His reaction to his new bedroom exposes this tenuous relationship to both house and family.

Maybe it was the largeness and whiteness of the room, which he was afraid he would betray himself by dirtying with the grime off his hands; its emptiness, too, since he hardly thought of himself as occupying it – it was so big. (p. 87)

Vic eventually assumes a more comfortable stance with the Warrender house as he learns to relax as a member of a family that eschews formality and after the war he does settle in the Warrender house staying there long-term. The more solid areas of the house compensate for any fragile parts.

The house is not always a place of settlement nor is it sheltering according to Uli Krahn. She describes Australian coastal houses as being ‘ill-designed cheaply-made houses’ that ‘fall apart quickly’ and she ties this to the difficulties of settling on a
land that has been taken from Indigenous Australians.\textsuperscript{68} Within her article, Krahn provides a definition of colonial settlement in relation to the Australian house. She states that, ‘Colonial settlement understands itself as imposing a human order on nature.’ (p. 98) Krahn then applies this idea of colonial settlement to contemporary settlement. Krahn argues that there is a kind of national guilt in relation to the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples by European settlers and she conveys a sense that within the nation there is a collective fear or anxiety that leads to an unattainable need for settlement. Of course, Krahn has in mind the houses of white Australians rather than those abodes built and lived in by Aboriginal people. Of Aboriginal houses, Krahn is silent. It is interesting in light of her assertions to briefly consider texts written by Indigenous authors. \textit{Benang} does conform to the idea that European dwelling is a type of intrusion, the imposition of humans: however, in this novel that intrusion is not so much on nature, but on the lives of Indigenous people. This is evidenced in passages where the narrator points out the negative implications for Aboriginal people when Euro-Australians move into areas where they have dwelled. For example, Aboriginal people are seen as an eyesore for white people moving into what was their land. ‘They wanted the situation improved; the reserve must be moved out of sight, and the children sent to some school of their own.’ (p. 136) In \textit{Carpentaria}, dwelling in Uptown, the site of the community of white people, is also tied to this idea of an intrusion but here the intrusion is environmental and is represented by the white population’s inability to create housing that responds to the environment. White inhabitants, for example, lie

in the hallway of their houses trying to catch any cooling breeze that might enter through the front door:

Lying flat-out like a corpse on the bare linoleum floor in the hallway of a house exactly like the one next door. Capturing in a long sigh of appreciation the northern sea breezes that came waltzing straight over twenty-five kilometres of mudflats, whistling their arrival through the front door while, on the way out, slamming the back door open and shut. (p. 8)

This desire and inability to be settled that Krahn describes is richly illustrated in Peter Carey’s novel *Illywhacker.* The novel explores the idea of possession of land and people through the tropes of house building and incarceration. Herbert Badgery builds a series of increasingly more elaborate structures often utilising stolen construction materials. His lover castigates him for his obsession with house building. ‘You think you can put up some shanty and that makes it your place, but you can’t and it never will be. The land is stolen. The whole country is stolen.’ Badgery’s houses mimic the fantasy of terra nullius that Krahn refers to.

David Crouch also takes up the argument about the Australian house and the anxiety of being settler occupiers. In his article he asks a series of questions that seem to duplicate Krahn’s viewpoint:

How can we speak of dwelling in the terms of private sanctuary spaces, or the ground, or the lie of the land when the foundations of this dwelling are literally ‘grounded’ in a landscape which is originally not ours? When it is the true and sacred, untranslated, dwelling place of Indigenous people who hail the natural world as both their kin and culture? How does this awareness then affect one’s sense of an interior’s felicitous space?  

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70 Peter Carey. p. 163.
Paul Carter has a similar argument to that of Krahn and Crouch. He suggests that although the house is built to fulfil the role of refuge it ultimately fails because it cannot stabilise the ground that is its foundation:

We live in our places off the ground; and it is our thesis, we idolize the picturesqueness of places because we sense our ungroundedness, the fragility of our claim to the soil.\(^72\)

Here Carter is referring to his argument that our houses lack a sympathetic relationship with the land on which they are situated because they are built on land taken from Indigenous Australians.

The assumption made by these scholars is that within the Australian community there is an awareness of an Aboriginal Australian authenticity of ownership of land in contrast to the ownership of land by later settlers. However, this is a contested notion as Peter Read points out in *Belonging*, which explores the deep-seated feelings of belonging amongst both European-Australian and Indigenous peoples. For example, the chapter titled ‘Growing’, considers the opinion of a high school student who argues, in relation to Indigenous connection to the land:

Why should they have their certain place when the rest of Australians can’t have it? What’s stopping one religious group coming up and saying well our god has told us that the Majura range is a sacred place, why can’t we feel that?\(^73\)

David Crouch’s argument is worth further consideration, however, as it goes on to apply the perspective that stolen land cannot shelter to the house image in Australian fiction, looking briefly, at the novel *Cloudstreet*. Winton’s narrative certainly demonstrates a sense of unease in the relationship between the Pickles and Lamb families and the house. The house could easily be read as a metaphor for

nation and the Lamb family could be seen as trying to establish a sense of settlement.

The Pickleses move around in the night, stunned and shuffling, the big emptiness of the house around them, almost paralysing them with spaces and surfaces that yield nothing to them...this great continent of a house doesn’t belong to them. They’re lost. (p. 41)

Crouch argues that the novel opens up uncomfortable notions of dwelling in a land that was taken from Aboriginal peoples. He sees *Cloudstreet* as a novel that deals with the issue of land rights by articulating a sense of not being settled. This is symbolised, according to Crouch, by the moaning of the house. He states, ‘One can read the moaning of the land, and house, to be representative of something stolen or dead, be it a child or an entire country.’ (p. 49) He alludes to this unease by quoting Oriel and Lester in a passage where they articulate their sense that the house behaves strangely. Crouch suggests that the family experiences an anxious sensation of ‘unsettled settlement’. (p. 51) His solution to the problem of dwelling so anxiously in Australian space is a shared utterance. He states that, ‘if dwelling experiences constantly involve the movements of sharing and articulating, then creating a richly intimate space is not impossible. (p. 51) He further suggests that the solution to this problematic form of dwelling, apart from articulation, is the creation of a space where ‘inside and outside are involved in a dialectics rather than an opposition’. (p. 51) Although settlement, in Oriel’s view, is about ‘stickability’, that quality of seeing things through and not giving up, it is also directly tied to the shop the Lamb family opens up in the front room of the house. (p. 58) Crouch’s ‘inside and outside’ are in dialogue through the liminal space of the shop.
Though Oriel and Lester speak of their disquiet in the house Dolly and Sam do not appear to feel the same way. The first twenty years of their presence in the Cloud Street house is tied to the fact that Uncle Joel’s will stipulates this specific period during which they are not able to sell the house. They are certainly sheltered in the house, as are Oriel and Lester, but they do not strive for a sense of settlement. Settlement, a sense of permanence, belonging and community, does eventuate for both families but it is not so much a result of articulation as the result of time and the growing close ties within and across the two families. It also follows the opening up of the library by inserting a window in the room. This action, alongside the opening of the shop in the front room of the house, could satisfy Crouch’s idea of a dialectic between inside and outside. Oriel describes the sense of settlement during a gathering of both families gained after living in the house for over twenty years:

But I have got used to it here, you know, she said. You might say I’ve come to love this awful old house. It was here for us when we had nothin. It never made it easy for us – and I tell youse, there’s times I’ve thought the place has been trying to itch us out – but I reckon we’ve made our mark on it now, like it’s not the house it was. We’re half way to belongin’ here, and …I don’t know where I’d go anymore. (p. 410-411)

Oriel’s point of view is endorsed by Dolly who suggests that, ‘The bloody place has got to us.’ (p. 411) At the conclusion of the narrative the reader has the sense that the Cloud Street home is a place of settlement, a permanent sanctuary, for both families.

Crouch also speaks of anxiety in relation to ‘dwelling comfortably, in settled repose, in sanctuary, in homes that are set in nature, and upon a land, which was stolen before it was settled.’ (p. 49) His definition of ‘anxious ground’ on stolen
land, offers a postcolonial view of settlement. However, in all the texts of this thesis, apart from Oriel and Lester in *Cloudstreet*, and Digger in *The Great World*, there is no suggestion that a sense of settlement, according to the definitions of Crouch and Krahn is necessary for the characters. They are happy to be sheltered, doing little to alter the houses in which they dwell and, apart from Lester and Oriel, not imposing order on the land surrounding the house. They also do not express a need to establish ties to community, and there is no sense that there is concern over whether or not the land on which any of the houses rests is ‘stolen’ from Indigenous Australians.

These debates about land and the guilt that attach to the way in which settlement occurred in Australia often confuse shelter with settlement and therefore come, illogically, to the conclusion that there is little possibility of shelter in the Australian house or as Crouch suggests a sense of ‘unsettled settlement’. (p. 51)

While ideas of settlement are contained in the novels *Remembering Babylon*, *The Great World* and *The White Earth* the notion of shelter is more often represented in Australian novels. An example of this is provided in *The Lieutenant*, which describes the protagonist, Rooke, as a newcomer in a strange land. He finds that, ‘Even the rocks were not like any others he had seen, monstrous plates and shards piled haphazardly on each other.’74 Rooke is not focused on settlement in the common sense of European colonial establishment. He separates himself literally and figuratively from other ‘settlers’ in his attempts to act empathetically towards the traditional owners of the land he finds so strange. Rather than being ‘unsettled’ by his new home, he tries to increase his understanding of it and this affects his

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mode of dwelling. The significant difference between these two notions of living on
the land is that settlement alters the space with a view to establishing permanent
possession while in the other instance the adaptation is of the person rather than the
environment. This difference is articulated through two characters, Rooke and Silk.
‘Silk’s impulse was to make the strange familiar; to transform it into well-shaped
smooth phrases. His own was to enter that strangeness and lose himself in it.’ 75 In
terms of shelter for Rooke the emotional is given as much weight as the physical
sense of shelter. His character demonstrates a way of sheltering which accepts both
the land in which he dwells and the original owners of it, rather than the more
difficult attempt to achieve settlement by altering the land and establishing a
homogenous community.

The issue of land rights is explored in the novel *The White Earth* in a more direct
manner than in *The Lieutenant*. After McIvor’s death his daughter articulates this
issue as she ponders the question of who has a claim over his property. She
supposes that one of those parties is the Aboriginal people driven from the land by
European Australians including her grandfather. The debate about land rights is a
central theme explored through the actions and desires of each of the main
characters in relation to the house. John McIvor, William, his mother and the
housekeeper all desire to own the house for various reasons. For example, McIvor’s
sense of respect is tied to his ownership of Kuran House, a once stately mansion on
a large acreage. For William and his mother, the house represents the possibility of
settlement. Inheriting the house would offer them a sense of security after the loss

75 Grenville, p. 139.
of their home. For McIvor’s housekeeper a similar sense of security could be obtained if she inherited the house that has been her home for many years.

Returning again to David Crouch’s article ‘Writing of Australian Dwelling: Animate Houses and Anxious Ground’, the title gives the impression of a type of house in which an occupant might live anxiously because of the exterior. It is a similar idea to that of Krahn who connects the horizontal aspect of the vernacular Australian house with the psychological act of crouching in fear.

The buildings are hugging the ground as if they dared not break the flat line of flight with a vertical. Many convicts and migrants must have found coming to Australia a frightening experience, possibly traumatizing, possibly aggravating earlier trauma. When you are afraid, you hide, you crouch, you do not separate from the cover. (p. 112)

These arguments ignore the physical reality that houses in early colonial Australia were historically spread out because of a lack of tools, building materials and expertise to build a second storey as well as an abundance of space that allowed for sprawl.76 Crouch and Krahn’s theses are diminished because they ignore the historical circumstances of building the vernacular Australian house and the fact that Australia was, initially at least, not a frightening place for many of the first settlers.

Crouch and Krahn’s ideas of agoraphobia are not reflected in contemporary Australian fiction. In contrast, to Crouch’s idea of anxious ground, for example, Elizabeth Ferrier contends that in Australian fiction characters often prefer to occupy the periphery of the house or even to abandon the house for a structure that seems closer to nature or the exterior (or further from the domestic) such as a tent.

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Ferrier relates this type of occupation or abandonment to a sense of claustrophobia experienced by characters. (p. 46) This sense of claustrophobia is evident in some of the novels. In *The Great World* for example, Vic’s response to his childhood poverty is a feeling of claustrophobia associated with the dwelling he occupies.

The great white slope of a wave would rise up and break in his sleep, come trickling first through the cracks in the walls, then press hard against the windows till they fell with a crash and sand came pouring over their table and chairs and the rafters caved in and the whole hill went over them. He would be fighting to get above it. (p. 71)

Vic is not the only character to experience claustrophobia. Digger’s mother also experiences this state of being towards the latter part of her life. This is dramatically imagined in the narrative when she abandons the house completely. ‘She would not go back into the house, and though he talked and tried to tempt her with things she had once cared about, she did not hear or would not listen.’ (p. 246)

Winton’s *Cloudstreet* also alludes to claustrophobia within the house for the characters of Rose and Oriel. This feeling of confinement is linked to the ghostly haunting of the library by an Aboriginal girl who committed suicide in the house. For Oriel, her sense that there is something forbidding in the house causes her to move outside and into a tent in the backyard. In Rose’s case a sense of claustrophobia is most pronounced on her return to the Cloud Street dwelling after voluntarily leaving her newly built suburban house.

Rose preferred the window open a little way and the curtains shucked back to ease her claustrophobia, even though she knew it meant having old Oriel monitoring them from her tent flap below. (p. 377)

Erika, in *The Memory Room* also conveys a sense of claustrophobia in her intermittent desire to escape the house she lives in with her father. A sense of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house is subtly described by references to
Kenneth Gelder and Jane Jacobs, like Crouch and Krahn, examine the idea of the Australian dwelling and anxiety about the land on which it is situated rather than a sense of anxiety caused by a need to escape the house. They argue that postcolonial Australia suffers from a sense of what Freud termed ‘unheimlich’ or the ‘uncanny’. According to the Freudian concept of unheimlich a duality, a simultaneous sense of both the familiar and reassuring and unfamiliar and vaguely threatening occurs. Gelder and Jacobs elaborate on their definition of the uncanny in the text, *Uncanny Australia*, stating that:

> An ‘uncanny’ experience may occur when one’s home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously.  

A clear example of the idea is contained in David Malouf’s historically themed novel *Remembering Babylon*.

> Most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown, and might still, for all your coming and going over it, and the sweat you poured into its acre or two of ploughed earth, have the last of mystery upon it, in jungle breaks between paddocks and ferny places out of the sun. Good reason, that, for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home.  

In this passage, the emphasis is on the need of the settlers to establish some sense of lasting ownership over the land in order to eradicate the unnerving feeling of not being sheltered in a mysterious land. The house in *Cloudstreet* is, also, initially, an ‘uncanny’ house for Oriel and Lester. They acknowledge this in an exchange.

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Oriel cracks her knuckles. Why’s Quick lit up like a beacon? Why is Fish the way he is? Why does this house…behave?
Strange, says Lester. (p. 231)

This sense of the uncanny is directly related to the feeling that they are not settled in the house. In an effort to effect settlement, Lester and Oriel establish a vegetable garden and create a shop from a front room in the house. This altering of their surroundings is what differentiates them from Dolly and Sam who are content to shelter in the house and make no comment on the house’s moaning. However, the sense of anxiety that Lester and Oriel experience is not typical of the majority of characters in the novels. Most characters do not concern themselves with the issue of settlement either within the house or on the land on which it is situated.

Bruce Bennett argues that the Australian house is somewhere between the tent and the castle in terms of human architectural achievement and that the castle is most often aspired to.\(^7\) This may well be true in relation to the Australian community, but it is not true in Australian fiction. The film The Castle, with its ironic title is an example of the type of desire experienced by characters in Australian fiction. In this film, the family’s ‘castle’ is a humble three-bedroom house which is highly valued by its owners.\(^8\) Bachelard points out that the hut, in contrast to the mansion, is often the abode of refuge. He states, ‘Over-picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy.’ (p. 12) It is this simplicity that marks out the Australian fictional house of shelter. Patrick White’s novel The Tree of Man captures Bachelard’s concept of the simple intimacy of the hut. The house built in the bush by Stan Parker with its simple meals by candlelight, white rosebush outside the window and

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\(^7\) Bennett. Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood, p. 5.
\(^8\) The Castle. Director, Ron Sitch, 1997.
logs for sitting to shell peas in the sunshine conjures this sense of intimate shelter.\textsuperscript{81} In the Australian context, I argue that although the castle is aspired to for the practical purposes of status and financial security, we more often dream of the “tent”.

One obvious example of the desirability of the tent occurs in \textit{Cloudstreet} when Oriel abandons the house. She erects a tent as her personal space in the backyard of the Cloud Street house.

She had a desk, Tilley lamp, chamberpot, books, mysterious boxes. People gathered at the fences. When she had it all in shape, Oriel Lamb tied off the door flap and went back into the house to organize her family’s dinner, and the crowd went away murmuring that surely this was a day to remember. (p. 133)

Oriel occupies the tent temporarily, returning to the house once she feels that she belongs there. Similar ideas of the preference by characters for a more open structure are evidenced in \textit{Crush} where Anna occupies the front room in a barely-there way. It is almost as if she is camping in the room. Anna also encounters a family living quite happily in a tent in Geraldton. She understands shelter as a makeshift condition when she suggests that Tom’s old car can be used as an abode for the children of one family. She states that, ‘They really need some shelter here.’ (p. 114)

The tent is more likely to be a transient form of dwelling rather than a settled one. This mode of dwelling best suits the Australian experience of the house according to Paul Carter who speaks of the undesirability of stasis and its related notion of

\textsuperscript{81} White. \textit{The Tree of Man}, p. 29-31.
settlement. There are many examples of representations of the house in Australian fiction where the mode of dwelling tends to be impermanent. This has been a consistent motif throughout the history of Australian fiction. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* by Henry Handel Richardson (1917), *The Battlers* by Kylie Tennant (1941), *Tirra Lirra By The River* by Jessica Anderson and *Monkey Grip* by Helen Garner, both published in the 1970s and *Illywhacker* by Peter Carey (1985) are just a few of the novels that illustrate this notion of inconstant dwelling by the main characters.

Shelter, then, might be experienced as an impermanent mode of protection. It is, as Yi-Fu Tuan points out, a place where one pauses to rest. In every one of the main novels considered in this thesis the protagonists undertake movement from one house to another. Each narrative partially concerns this transient mode of dwelling. Erika and Vincent in the novel *The Memory Room*, for example, move from Hobart to Peking and then to Canberra. In *The Great World* Digger and Vic maintain long associations with one house, yet, they do move into, at least, one other dwelling. Digger, for example, moves out of the house at Keen’s Crossing as a young man and he moves between his own home and Iris’s house in Sydney after the war.

In both *Carpentaria* and *Benang*, Indigenous characters such as Angel Day and Harley also adopt a transient mode of dwelling. Angel moves house on a number of occasions while Normal moves out of the house for a period of five years. Other characters move house as a matter of necessity. The characters in *The White Earth*

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move to Kuran House after their own home burns down. In *Cloudstreet*, Oriel and Lester move from the country to the city because their farm has failed to bring in an income. Sam and Dolly move because they inherit a house in the suburbs of Perth.

In line with the adoption of a transient mode of dwelling, which suggests shelter rather than settlement, most characters are depicted as adapting quickly to new dwellings. For example, Vic in *The Great World* moves from a simple shack to the Warrender’s more spacious and substantial home. He adapts quickly to the new house and this enables him to find shelter. Despite his belief that he is not really a part of the family he quickly modifies his behaviour to fit in.

He had wanted, always to be the perfect son, and this was easy because the Warrenders were so nearly what he might have conceived of as the perfect parents. He put the past behind him, rediscovered a kind of innocence, and let his spirit loose, slipping back into his heavier nature only when he had shut a door behind him. (p. 93)

Like Vic, Mandy In *The Children*, rapidly adapts to new circumstances. She quickly adjusts to the transient nature of dwelling as part of her career as a war journalist. In particular, she learns to tolerate the ‘blokey’ behaviour of her male colleagues and to dress appropriately within a Moslem community. In the case of Digger and Vic their adaptation to a life of internment in Changi prison ensures their survival. The novels are rendered complex through this ability to adapt to new dwellings because it allows the characters to be placed in more than one setting.

Paul Carter’s exploration of the idea that the Australian colonial house was a kind of rest stop relates to this idea of transient dwelling. Carter associates colonialism with the making of roads. He states that:
In effect, the selector was making a road and what he meant by a road was a place where one could not get lost, where one was always at home, a place that, one day, might be arrested. 84

For Carter, the house, in colonial times, began as a resting place rather than a space to be settled in. This association of the house in colonial Australia with the idea of a rest stop does not, in Carter’s opinion, render that space sheltering. In a chapter of The Road to Botany Bay, entitled ‘Intimate Charm’ Carter begins by recounting the Reverend J.R. Wollaston’s elation on seeing a lit candle as he returns to his Albany home after a long journey. Yet, Carter dwells superficially on the topic of the house as a welcoming sanctuary. He pays more attention to gumtrees as an important metonym of intimate Australian space. He states that it is the tree rather than the candle that best symbolises the historical idea of place in Australia. (p. 264) Nevertheless, although his argument underestimates the significance of the house as a shelter it does illustrate the notion of not being settled because of the desire for movement, and transience is a mode of living which features in many of the novels of this chapter.

Unlike colonial ideas of shelter, in the contemporary context, shelter is seen as sufficient despite its fragility or makeshift nature and there is a clear sense that settlement is unnecessary. For Jenny Keen in The Great World the house provides shelter but it fails to provide a sense of settlement, even though she lives there long-term, because she does not have community ties even though she reluctantly works in the shop attached to the house. She is uncomfortable in the world outside the house at Keen’s Crossing. Jenny has ‘a war on with the magpies.’ (p. 4) She is also

ill at ease with the feral cats that sometimes flatten the plants in the garden. Most significantly she is disconcerted by the youths who visit the shop attached to the house that she manages and who handle the goods and sometimes steal them.

She had to stop herself from yelling at them, telling them off. ‘Look youse, if yer gunna buy that tinna jam just buy it, don’t stand there chuckin’ it about.’ But if you did that there would be trouble. For one thing, they were customers, and for another they were dangerous. (p. 6)

The “great world” is the world outside the house for Jenny. She has come to see the idea of ‘going places’ as men’s business. (p. 62) Despite her earlier attempts to experience other spaces, the world has proved to be a frightening place for her. Yet she is sheltered within the house and this is sufficient. In fact, many of the characters in The Great World ricochet between their desire for the world outside their houses and their longing for the comfort of domestic space, eventually being content settling in one space. Jenny and Vic are examples here. They both leave their childhood houses but find the outside world challenging and confusing in the case of Jenny and something he is content to withdraw from in the case of Vic. Many contemporary characters in Australian fiction appear to be transient dwellers for whom settlement is not vital. This is the case for all the main characters, Derek, Erika and Vincent, in The Memory Room whose careers depend on this. For Angel and Normal in Carpentaria there is a sense of community with Pricklebush residents freely commenting on the actions of the couple. Despite this it seems as though they do not feel the need for settlement because they do not see the house as a permanent dwelling and leave it without regret.

Despite the fact that settlement is not a particularly sought-after state of dwelling for most of the characters, several of them are eventually settled as well as sheltered
in their homes. Digger is not simply sheltered by the house at Keen’s Crossing he is also settled there on his return from Changi. He belongs to the land and his deep connection to it is vital to him. His sense of belonging is symbolised by the fact that this space bears the family name. Digger feels a deep level of attachment, despite the fact that he comes from a family that felt no sense of belonging to Keen’s Crossing. This sustains him while he is a prisoner in Changi.

Years later, in some of the worst times in Thailand, this connection would sustain Digger and help keep him sane, keep him attached to the earth; to the brief stretch of it that was continuous with his name and through that, with his image of himself. He could be there at will. He only had to dive into himself and look about. (p. 199)

Unlike many of the other soldiers who find comfort in their exterior lives such as cars they have owned or girls they have dated Digger is sustained by his memories of domestic space. He draws on scenes of domesticity as reassurance while he is a prisoner-of-war. Digger is sheltered from the brutality of his circumstances by daydreams of Iris’ home and a glass vase of sweet-peas contained within it. The smell of the sweet-peas revives him. Similarly, he imagines the act of drinking water drawn from a tap in the kitchen and this assuages his thirst.

Digger’s mate, Vic, is also attracted to the domestic and this causes him to settle in the Warrender house. Vic feels most comfortable in the housekeeper Meg’s domain, the kitchen. He sits in companionable silence with Meg.

If it was winter the kitchen would be fuggy warm, the windows still dark. They would sit and watch them turn blue, and after a little she would get up and bring him a bowl of porridge and watch him eat. (p. 260)

It is a plain image that reverberates within the reader because it is so easily recognisable. It also provides contrast to the shack of Vic’s childhood where the home was, at all times, under threat from invading sands. For Vic, the domestic
environment becomes reassuring and provides solidity to his and Ma Warrender’s expectations for the soap manufacturing business they manage.

The domestic setting, the fragments of the meal (‘There is something very reassuring,’ Ma thought, ‘about burnt toast’), gave an unemphatic quality to their talk; the solid grip on things suggested by teacup handles and spoons grounded in what might otherwise have seemed fantastic in the ordinary and commonplace. (p. 253)

Ma Warrender has known little separation between the domestic and the outside world. The house and the soap factory that is next door contain her life. She replicates this state of being when she interacts with Vic on business matters by mixing the domestic with business at the dining table. Similarly, Vic is greatly comforted by the house and, in particular, the kitchen where he spends time with Meggsie. Ellie and Vic continue to live in the house after their marriage. ‘It was as if the house already contained the forms their life would need.’ (p. 270) Vic’s war experiences mean that he can never take the simplest things for granted.

He had thought he would never get used to any other condition in life; that those ordinary things – clean shirts, hot baths, a woman’s hand – would go on being so miraculous as to be barely grasable, and only the proximity of death quite real. (p. 279)

He is settled in the Warrender house partly as a reaction to his internment during the war.

In the novel, Crush, Tom O’Brien is also settled in his Alice Street home once he stablises its foundations. His settlement is however, not something he particularly strives for. He is so at ease in his house that it requires no curtains. His bedroom is sparsely furnished and is almost monk-like. It is described as ‘clean and bare, curtainless.’ (p. 14) Tom seems easily satisfied with his own house, as if he inhabits it very lightly. Both Anna and Tom get by in the house with a minimum of
furnishings. Anna has a mattress on the floor and a cardboard box on its side, which she uses to contain her clothes. (p. 25) It is almost as though she and Tom camp in the house yet Tom is settled there. This sense of settlement comes, in part, from his connections to the community of North Perth. He works in the area as a lawyer, eats in local eateries, plays backgammon with a friend at the local Lebanese restaurant and buys his newspaper at the ‘Vietnamese deli on the corner’. (p. 45) There is also a sense that he is likely to continue to live in the house long-term. Anna, on the other hand, is not settled in the Alice Street house but she is sheltered. One of the main themes of the narrative concerns Anna’s search for her father. The fact that she doesn’t seek settlement yet expects shelter in its lightest sense allows her to seamlessly leave various living spaces such as the flat with the blooded architraves and the house she shares, temporarily, with Tom who may be her father. Some of the characters in other texts, such as Vincent and Derek in *The Memory Room* and the family in *The Children* take for granted the idea of the house in Australia as a settled space. In both these novels there is a sense of complacency about belonging and the relationship to the house. This contentment with the position of the dweller and the land on which the house is positioned affords each character a sense of security and this sense of security is the most likely reason why the characters are able to casually leave the house and travel to other places. 

Shelter and/or settlement within the house usually has one of two opposing effects within the novels of this thesis. On one hand, it creates a sense of contentment and confidence for some characters because it leads to a stable environment. Digger is perhaps the character who most obviously portrays this idea. He is able to fluidly travel between his home at Keen’s Crossing and Iris’s home in Sydney because of
his sense of settlement in relation to his childhood house and this is due to the fact that it remains unchanged and familiar. The house at Keen’s Crossing provides a stable base to return to. Similarly, when Digger is interned in the camp during the war he uses the Keen’s Crossing house as a place of stability he can return to in his mind. Settlement is also a major theme of *Cloudstreet*, and its pursuit is a process that directs the narrative. Its attainment creates a sense of contentment for the two families in the novel. Settlement is also the goal of the protagonist, McIvor, *In The White Earth*, but it is established early in the narrative when he attains Kuran House. The settlement felt by McIvor cements his understanding that he has an entitlement to the house and land on which it is situated. The actions of his forbearers in massacring the traditional owners of the land are justified in their eyes because of their need to establish settlement or because they have already done so. McIvor’s sense of settlement on the land and within the house also allows him to confidently pursue the goal of non-Indigenous land rights.

While settlement can create a sense of security for a character it can be a precursor to a sense of the uncanny when houses that evoked that sense of settlement or shelter for characters become ‘unsettled’. In *The Children*, the sense of settlement is taken for granted for characters like Margaret, Geoff and Cathy. Settlement has also been taken for granted by Mandy and Stephen until their circumstances change dramatically. For example, the house is rendered uncanny for Mandy when she returns to what is a familiar and historically secure environment that has existed as such throughout her childhood. It is rendered unsettling because of her experiences in war-torn countries overseas. The particular sound of her freezer, for example, is one that Mandy must be quite familiar with, however, it takes on the sense of a
mortar after she returns from her job as a war journalist. It is this juxtaposition of
the familiar and the unfamiliar that is used so effectively to describe her trauma.
For Stephen, the reminders of his sense of settlement in his childhood home, such
as the stickers he has placed on the wardrobe, are afforded a sense of poignancy by
his earlier ejection from the house.

So far, I have argued that the makeshift and fragile house shelters its occupants but
there is a particular kind of shelter that makes these houses a sanctuary. This type of
shelter is encapsulated by Gaston Bachelard’s consideration of physical,
psychological and poetic aspects of shelter. He takes an encompassing approach to
the concept of the sheltering house. Bachelard keeps in mind the physicality of the
house and its environment as well as the psychological aspect of shelter in his
work, arguing that the well-chosen house, the house of felicitous space, acts as a
shelter ‘through the storms of the heavens and those of life.’ (p. 7) He makes it
clear that he is speaking of the house’s capacity to shelter the mental and emotional
wellbeing of its occupants as well as their material being and possessions. He
argues that although the house is primarily a solid geometrical object it is
transformed to a space of intimacy and cheerfulness as soon as it is imagined.
(p. 49) It is, however, that third aspect of shelter, the poetic dimension, which
renders Bachelard’s definition complete. The poetic image, according to Bachelard,
occurs as ‘a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche.’ (p. xv) He describes the
term ‘poetic’ as being immediately recognisable as true and moving the reader at
the heart of their being. (p. 12) An example of the way in which Bachelard achieves
this synthesis of elements of shelter is contained in his example of his childhood
home. Here he combines information about the architectural features of a room
with a childhood smell of raisins drying in a cupboard. (p. 13) Immediately the reader can conjure the feeling of being a child in that room.

This type of complex description of the house is seen in The Memory Room where Derek Bradley, as narrator, constructs an intricate description of the house of his friend Vincent’s adolescence. Derek describes the physical aspects of the sheltering house such as the shape of the dining room, along with its sense of establishment, permanence and history. He combines these aspects with pleasant olfactory memories. There is a sense of comfort permeating the room because it is a space Vincent’s aunt, Connie, has made her own.

A bowl of after-dinner mints – one of her few indulgences – sits on the table beside the decanter of sherry, her current library book and her knitting. This high-ceilinged room, with its big Victorian dining table and sideboard, and its still close air has the faintly musty odour that Bradley remembers. (p. 4)

A major part of Derek’s sense of comfort comes from knowing that time has not altered the position of objects that signify sanctuary for him.

They’ve finished dinner, and are drinking their sherry in the dining room, sitting in the small, brocade-upholstered armchairs on either side of the hearth that have been a fixture ever since Bradley can remember. He always recalls Connie sitting in the one she is in now, with the little antique wine table at her elbow. (p. 4)

In relation to the house Bachelard states, that ‘imagination augments the values of reality.’ (p. 3). In other words, the way in which a house might be imagined adds a layer over the physicality of the house that enhances one’s view of it and creates poetic space. For example, Tim Winton states that he grew up with two very different childhood homes. The first home he describes is ‘the quintessential Australian suburban’ home and the second, more dear to him, is the beach shack which he fondly describes. ‘A strange house in retrospect, to a child it was the most
remarkable place to have year after year, and I sometimes think that it was this house that caused me to become a writer. The library in the novel *Cloudstreet* has its genesis in the Geraldton beach shack which also has a dedicated library. This blending of fact and fiction creates a vital house in the novel. Poetic space such as that described by Bachelard and exemplified in Winton’s prose creates shelter.

David Malouf, in his text, *12 Edmondstone Street*, considers the house as shelter in all its facets. He describes the physical structure, the emotional connection and the sense of poetic shelter that comes from dwelling in a weatherboard house.

They have about them the improvised air of tree houses. Airy, open often with no doors between the rooms, they are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying-foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest.

A similar Queensland house is described in the novel *Orpheus Lost* by Janette Turner Hospital.

Like all equatorial habitations, the house rested on twelve-foot stilts so that cooling breezes and cyclonic floodwaters could pass beneath. Above the stilts there was more outdoors than indoors: more covered veranda than walled rooms.

In *The Great World* the houses are imagined to be in New South Wales where they are much closer to the ground and perhaps less easily described poetically. However, Malouf creates a poetic space within the kitchen of the house that Digger Keen imagines while he is a prisoner-of-war. This image sustains him:

There was a wooden rack over the sink with plates in it, thick white ones. They leaned there drying, and had been washed a thousand times with a block of Sunlight soap in a little wire cage-like contraption, and rinsed, lifted out of the water and left. Beautiful they were. (p. 146)

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86 David Malouf. *12 Edmondstone Street*, p. 10.
This passage of the narrative suggests that the simple beauty found in the house’s kitchen is capable of providing refuge for Digger despite the fact that he is physically removed from it. Digger imagines a bunch of sweet-peas in Iris’s house in a similarly poetic way.

Cut, in a tight little bunch, they would sit in a glass in the front room. He saw the room empty, with the curtains drawn against the sun, which could be strong, even in winter, and the glass with its two kinds of light, one air, one water, and the pale stalks and paler blossoms on a table in the centre of it. (p. 146)

The evocations of items in the various rooms are particularly poetic. The bar of soap in its wirecage, the light coming off of the drying plates on a wooden rack on the bench in the kitchen and the glass vase of sweet-peas, all these items are familiar and yet beautiful because of Malouf’s poetic description.

This poetic aspect is also found in a house in *The Memory Room*. Here Derek Bradley’s home with its open fire and Sunday smell of lamb roast is the most profound shelter that protagonist Vincent encounters. Bradley’s friend, Vincent, conceives this house as a sheltering space. He is drawn to the traditional idea of family, privacy and retreat. Vincent’s obsession with the Sunday night ritual at Bradley’s house speaks to his need for comfort. This turns the house into a refuge for him.

Sunday night was when Bradley’s mother always cooked a roast. As well, she would bake a chocolate cake, to be eaten later in the evening with coffee, and this cake seemed to give Vincent a special and extraordinary pleasure; in fact, he enthused over it to a degree that amused the whole family. It clearly lay at the heart of the Sunday night ritual for him. (p. 29)

His traditional view of what a household should be gives him comfort but there is also a poetic element to this description of the house as a place with a rhythm. In
The Memory Room

Vincent’s house in New Town has a view across the valley to Risdon. The houses he sees from his window are the stuff of children’s tales.

Out there, down in the valley behind the steep gabled roofs of Bay Road, with their snug dormer windows and tall, smoking chimneys from an Edwardian children’s picture book, the distant lights of Risdon Road stretch across the twilight. (p. 8 - 9)

The land itself seems as though it is a fairyland in Bradley’s eyes: ‘Vincent and he were children in a special sort of suburb, in a mostly rural island at the far end of the world.’ (p. 31) In Koch’s novel, houses in Tasmania are secure places for daydreams specifically because they are private and isolated spaces. Vincent’s house, for example, allows him and Erika the room to indulge their adolescent fantasies of becoming spies. The idea of intimacy of the house in relation to its setting is demonstrated further by the fact that it is a hermetic space and the streets nearby are most often empty.

Brenda Walker’s houses and flats in the novel Crush are also poetically invoked. Anna describes various dwellings in the city of Perth in her dreams and her memory. For example, she says of the room in a shared flat she lived in: ‘I liked my big, gloomy room, its curvaceousness, its blooded architraves.’(p. 62) Similarly, in Crush, simple suburban houses are also rendered poetic:

There are lighted windows in the suburbs, behind one a white-haired woman sings in a paper-thin voice. She talks to her garden laid out between sun and sand, she talks to the succulents, she sustains them in summer. (p. 53)

The description of the weatherboard and asbestos cottage in Alice Street in North Perth is also poetic. Here the fragility of the house is described with humour and a sense that the makeshift quality is endearing.

It didn’t look promising. The roof had sheets of tin flapping in the breeze, the stumps were crumbling with white ants, the plumbing was stiff with bamboo
roots. I got a few blokes from the local Unemployed Youth Centre. We lifted the house with carjacks and choked it up on bricks. (p. 23-24)

The houses mentioned here are poetic. The Alice Street house, for example, has a cellar. Bachelard singles out this architectural feature as poetic space:

> As for the cellar, we shall no doubt find uses for it. It will be rationalized and its conveniences enumerated. But it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. (p. 18)

The cellar in *Crush* resonates particularly because of the items found there:

> old suitcases with P&O stickers, eerie comics, Polish wine, Victorian photographs of stiff brides, a plastic wreath under a glass dome which looked as if it belonged on a grave, a belt for tying off a vein and a spike to stick into it. (p. 24)

The house in *Cloudstreet* is also a poetic space. Some of the floors sing when stepped on. Iron lace decorates the verandah and the rain falls ‘sweetly on the corrugated iron roof.’ (p. 40) All these images are easily recognisable and are designed to resonate in the depths of the reader’s mind. The house is quite fragile in some ways. It is a large old house with sloping floors and buckling windows. This depiction illuminates the characters of the two families that share the house. Sam Pickles is down on his luck and fragile after the loss of his hand in an accident and the loss of money after gambling. Rose and Dolly are rendered vulnerable as they fight their demons. For Rose, her eating issues and for Dolly, her excess drinking, render both women fragile. Similarly, the Lamb family is vulnerable after the near death of their son and brother Fish. Ted sums up the connections between the house and its occupants: ‘Reckon it’s a frigging house o cards I do, said Ted. The old girl’s the wild card and the old man’s the bloody joker’. (p. 41) These fragile features of the house are often described poetically such as where Winton describes the floors are ‘singsong’. (p.39)
Similarly, in *The Children* the house has become the site of poignant memories for the parents, Margaret and Geoff. The spare bedroom that was Stephen’s room has stalled in time. The wardrobe has retained the stickers Stephen placed on it:

> A turquoise diamond with *Hey Charger!* and the Chrysler logo in black; a three-inch square sticker of an AC/DC album cover. A ‘signed’ poster of Dennis Lillee that he remembers tearing out of the Sunday paper, then rolling thick with glue and sticking to the door, smoothing it over and over, admiringly, with the side of his hand. 88

The room speaks of the sorrow of losing a son, Stephen, of his being thrown out of the house by Geoff when he was an adolescent. The house also holds Margaret’s memories of being a new mother trying to cope with the demands and boredom of domesticity. Her husband’s fall from the roof acts as a catalyst for these memories.

> It is as if his skidding boot, his body as he tumbled, has knocked loose a stone in a wall and made a small irregular gap through which her life comes pouring, dry as sand. (p. 16)

Geoff’s repair of the house’s roof is tinged with a feeling of sorrow after he spots a lost and abandoned tennis ball. The ball symbolises the growing up and growing away of his children. Even the tiles he carries to the roof take on the weight of a baby as he climbs the ladder. ‘Again there is the little zzzt of memory, to do with the children, to do with the weight of a baby in his arms all those years ago.’ (p. 4)

The house in *The White Earth* is divided into two areas. The ground floor is roughly partitioned and many of the more beautiful architectural features have been removed. The upper storey however, has, in the past at least, contained poetic spaces. Of these the white room is the most poetic.

> And then, at the end of the hall, in the right-hand corner of the west wing, he came to one last open door. This room was all white, and shone with an ethereal glow from arched windows hung with billowing gauze. (p. 30)

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It is the coming together of the physical, psychological and poetic elements of the houses in these texts that enables a sense of shelter, and in some cases settlement, for characters. This is quite different from colonial texts where settlement was a desired aspect of the house. Settlement, where it is achieved in the lives of characters in these contemporary texts seems to be almost incidental rather than a sought after state. The poetic is particularly important in the representations of the house in these novels and it is the simple details of the domestic and the architectural that create the poetic. These poetically invoked houses are depicted in contemporary Australian fiction as shelters, places of comfort and security. The sustenance they provide is psychological and spiritual as well as physical. However, these sheltering places are often fragile and makeshift and are most often dwelled in temporarily. Despite this the shelter found here is not superficial. Shelter is imagined as a physical, psychological and emotional condition. It also registers at a poetic level.
Chapter Two

‘An irregular and secret home’: Indigenous Representations of the House

Prior to European settlement Aboriginal living spaces, in many areas of Australia, accommodated a nomadic lifestyle. Dwellings were designed to be quickly and efficiently built from local materials. For example, Paul Memmott describes transitory shelters, built in the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria, as normally having a lifespan of several weeks and being erected mainly for the purpose of sheltering from inclement weather. However, not all Aboriginal living spaces were temporary. Northcote Thomas argues against a refutation of Aboriginal architecture and notions of its impermanence in his text, *Natives of Australia*. He states that the argument that Aboriginal people had no permanent habitation was a common misperception. He goes on to describe substantial huts built of wood and carpeted with seaweed. Nevertheless, Aboriginal architecture tends to be dismissed in histories of Australian architecture. For example, in Boyd’s seminal text on Australian architecture, *Australia’s Home*, he states:

> The house, the home, the permanent address – this was the white man’s idea; the blacks had no use for it. For unknown centuries they had wandered

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91 Northcote. p.72
through bush, desert and soaking mountain forest, carrying less protection than the meanest marsupial.  

More recently, John Archer’s history of the Australian house, titled *The Great Australian Dream: The History of the House*, (1987) insists that Australian architecture began in 1788. This chapter attempts, in the light of such assumptions, to understand the architectural validity of Indigenous houses over time and to recognise a diversity of Indigenous ways of living, forms of living space, and reasons for mobility, by examining representations of the house in contemporary Indigenous fiction.

A number of contemporary Australian novels written by Indigenous authors examine representations of Aboriginal living spaces and explore how the house illustrates what it is to be Aboriginal. This chapter establishes how those spaces affect narrative, character and setting and examines Bachelard’s notion of the house as a shelter while exploring the meanings attached to the house from an Indigenous perspective. In this way, I hope to maintain the idea of a house in a properly ethnographic sense, that is, insofar as the concept is imbued with a distinct cultural interface. Representations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous houses are a feature of both *Carpentaria* and *Benang*, the two novels used in this chapter. The interpretation of these dwellings from the perspective of the Indigenous characters in both novels elucidates ideas of shelter and settlement. These are areas of research that are, to date, largely unexplored.

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92 Boyd. *Australia’s Home*, p. 137.

Aboriginal narratives have existed as oral stories, paintings, body scarification and sand drawings for tens of thousands of years; however, the history of written fiction by Aboriginal writers is as recent as the mid-twentieth century. Within the written form, autobiographical and semi-autobiographical accounts of postcolonial life have predominated until recently. The last three decades have witnessed a growth in the number of published Aboriginal novels that have ‘written back’ to a colonial perception of dwelling in Australia. Baker and Worby argue that the 1992 Mabo decision and its recognition of Indigenous Australian land rights has created a space for narratives that are alternative to mainstream conceptualisations of Australian history and literature.94 The novels examined in this chapter have been published after that decision and they reconfigure Euro-Australian perceptions of dwelling.

Representations of the house in contemporary works of fiction by two Indigenous writers, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright have been chosen for examination in this chapter for several reasons. Firstly, they are contemporary examples of postcolonial fiction. Scott’s *Benang* was published in 1999 and Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* was published in 2006.95 Secondly, both writers have been recognised for their literary contributions to the greater understanding of Australian life as winners of the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Scott shared the prize for *Benang* in 2000 and Wright won the prize for *Carpentaria* in 2007. Thirdly, scholars such as Susan Lever have singled out these two novels as exemplifying a postcolonial perspective on

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Australia’s history and ways of telling Indigenous stories. Lastly, in these particular novels, domestic spaces, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, play a significant role in the narratives.

*Benang* is a narrative about the history of Nyoongar people in the South West of Western Australia. It traces the devastating consequences of government policies of attempted separation, absorption and assimilation of the Nyoongar race over the period of approximately a hundred years. The narrator, Harley, is a young man researching his family history. Harley’s search takes him to government sources in the form of written documents as well as on a journey with his two uncles Jack Chatalong and William Coolman. Harley’s search is sparked by his discovery of letters and written accounts that reveal his grandfather’s eugenic attempts to ‘breed’ the ‘first white man born’ from Aboriginal ancestry. (p. 10) He discovers these papers in the office of his grandfather’s house.

*Carpentaria* has a different focus to *Benang*. It has a contemporary setting and is less concerned with a pedagogic retelling of history and more concerned with Aboriginal forms of story telling. This is evidenced in the way that it has the feel of an oral narrative. *Carpentaria* is the story of the Phantom family who live outside the fictional town of Desperance, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Normal Phantom, his partner, Angel Day, and their children occupy a self-built house in the Pricklebush fringe camp opposite a rubbish dump. The narrative is a complex exploration of Indigenous dwelling and subversion on the fringes of a town where mining is the

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main source of income. The area of the town dominated by white settlers is called Uptown while the area occupied by the Phantom family is known as Pricklebush. The depictions of Aboriginal dwelling in the novel *Carpentaria* suggest an Indigenous domestic space that is decidedly makeshift. Yet, the house has a spiritual dimension that re-imagines the trope of the haunted house. Conventionally, a haunting presence is centred on a room inside the house. For instance, the ghost contained in the house in Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* is embedded within the structure of the house, in the walls of the library. In *Carpentaria* the metaphysical is found under the house in the form of a snake spirit. In Winton’s novel, the ghost is expelled when a window is opened up in the library. In contrast, *Carpentaria* offers no solution to the problems associated with building a house on land that is the province of the snake spirit other than moving the house altogether. The location of the snake spirit in *Carpentaria* unsettles Normal and compels him to leave the house and live off the land for a period of five years. This movement away from the house drives a significant part of the narrative detailing Normal’s life as a fisherman. It signifies that the ‘house’ is not the only shelter available to Indigenous men.

*Benang* and *Carpentaria* depict a unique Aboriginal architecture that is rarely represented in contemporary Australian literature, perhaps because these spaces are overlooked. Stephanie Smith argues that the fact that contemporary Aboriginal domestic spaces are rarely afforded the status of architecture relates to a white desire to negate the circumstances of Aboriginal dwelling.97 In such circumstances,

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novels such as Benang and Carpentaria have the potential to insist on the reality of a uniquely Indigenous architecture. Like Nene Gare’s The Fringe Dwellers, Carpentaria makes a significant contribution to the articulation of knowledge of contemporary Aboriginal domestic space, particularly that of ‘fringe camps’. 98 It represents the house in a way that invites new interpretations of the significance of fragility and the makeshift. These alternative notions of dwelling have been explored in anthropological studies such as that described by Smith’s research on contemporary ‘tin camps’ in New South Wales. She points out that the use of readily available and cost effective building materials has the advantage of facilitating speed of erection of living space using simple tools and limited levels of building knowledge, as well as a degree of independence as a home owner that might not be otherwise possible. (p. 198)

There is a diversity of domestic space represented in the two novels. Firstly, there is domestic space occupied or owned, and, sometimes, built by Indigenous characters. Examples here include Number One House, Angel’s grey fibro house and Joseph Midnight’s house in Carpentaria, as well as Harry Cuddles’, Jack Chatalong’s and Sandy One’s houses in Benang. At times, Indigenous living spaces provide shelter only in the most basic sense of protection against inclement weather. This is particularly the case in Carpentaria where there are references to Aboriginal people taking up residence in abandoned cars behind the fences of Uptown residents (p. 33). Similarly, there are descriptions of ‘little petrol sniffers living in fortresses of abandoned car bodies.’ (p. 326). There are also domestic spaces that are described

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by, but are not owned or occupied by, Aboriginal characters. These domestic spaces are normally occupied by European Australians and in the case of *Benang* they are spaces where Aboriginal people are employed as servants. An example here is the house belonging to the Mustle family. It is a place where cruelty is meted out to Aboriginal servants. One elderly man, for example, is made to swallow the dregs of cups of tea. Sandy One sees ‘Mrs. Mustle, with one of her sisters-in-law, beckon one of her old and crippled slaves to the door. She had the old man tilt his head back, and she tipped the tea dregs from her fine china pot down his throat.’ (p. 491) A further example here is the house on a station in *Benang* described by Sandy One where bells are used to summon Indigenous domestic servants. The Mustle house is also used as a place to dispense ‘justice’.

Mustle, as did many of the others, held trials in his homestead. People were chained up on the verandah, and given their chance to speak in whatever English they may have had. Mustle liked to wear a wig on these occasions, to use the proper legal language, and make his impressive voice boom. (p. 467)

Another house, the home of the Done family, is a space that Aboriginal people avoid if possible. There are heavy keys on a shelf that are used for locks to chain Aboriginals and ropes to tie up Aboriginal women. These diverse imaginings of domestic space all have in common the fact that they are postcolonial spaces representing the complex relationship of Indigenous characters to the fictional house, and they foreground the politics of dwelling as an Indigenous Australian.

In any discussion of postcolonial writing it is important to clarify the definition as there are multiple meanings attached to the term ‘postcolonial’. I use the term in the same broad sense as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin ‘to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present.
This definition recognises both the immediacy of effects of imperial settlement, its continuous repercussions and the resistance of those affected by this settlement. By ‘postcolonial writing’ I mean that which renders explicit the implications of imperialism on the people of a colonised country.

Typically, Australian notions of the house and housing have been inextricably connected to colonial settlement. The colonial house represented permanency, private ownership, and connections to the ‘Mother Country’. Martin Boyd’s *The Cardboard Crown* is an example here. Scott and Wright both play with these notions in their novels. For example, Scott uses the portrait of the Queen to represent Empire. The portrait hangs in the boarding house run by Harley’s grandfather, a character who represents the imperial project of dilution of the Indigenous race. Similarly Wright uses a clock to demonstrate a European preoccupation with structuring time into measurable units. For Angel Day, the clock represents the prosperity she hopes to attract by possessing an object she associates with comparatively wealthy non-Indigenous people: ‘Not only would her family be able to tell the time, and be able to tell poor outsider people like themselves what the time was, but they would also be prosperous.’ (p. 23)

From the perspective of Aboriginal peoples, the non-Indigenous house has too often been connected to oppression, surveillance, violence and domestic servitude. The history of Indigenous domestic housing in Australia has continuously stood in contrast to that of non-Indigenous housing, especially in the areas of home

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ownership, housing standards and government control. Where non-Indigenous Australians tend to associate the house with civilisation and security, from an Indigenous perspective the house (since European settlement) is more likely to be associated with regulation. Peter Read has argued that, ‘From the earliest post-invasion time, Aboriginal housing was not an end in itself, but secondary to the aims of resocialisation and acculturation.’ Australian government policies of segregation and, later, assimilation have been deeply implicated in loss of culture and painful separation from family. Housing was a major tool for the implementation of these policies.

These negative connotations of housing are evidenced in many autobiographical and semi-autobiographical accounts of Australian Aboriginal domestic life. Sally Morgan, Ruby Langford Ginibi and Alice Nannup have each, in their biographical accounts of domestic life, presented the disjunction between the meanings and associations of the house in Australia for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Their descriptions of the lived experience of the house provide examples of ways in which an Aboriginal sense of house might differ significantly from that of the wider population, particularly from the typical non-Indigenous perspective. Sally Morgan’s My Place is an example of a text where the house plays a significant role in the articulation of the conditions of Indigenous Australian dwelling. In Morgan’s case, the house is represented as a complex space where both good and bad memories are formed. The house of her childhood acts as a setting in Morgan’s

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101 Read. Settlement: A History of Australian Indigenous Housing, p. ix
popular autobiography, which represents 1960s suburban Indigenous Australian life. One of the main features of *My Place* is the strong sense of family, centred within the house, despite the tension created by poverty, her father’s chronic illness, her parents’ fighting and the fact that their Aboriginality was closeted. (p. 21) Morgan details, for example, the evenings when her family gathered around the television or by the open fire to swap stories.

I’ll never forget those evenings, the open fire, Mum and Nan, all of us laughing and joking. I felt very secure, then. I knew it was us against the world, but I also knew that, as long as I had my family, I’d make it. (p. 53)

There is a sense of isolation, but also of intimacy, ‘a warm centre in a cold world’, contained in Morgan’s representation of family life that brings to mind Bachelard’s ideas of the way that a cold exterior world might enhance the sense that the interior of the house is cosy and secure and the perfect venue for swapping yarns. (p. 41) In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard suggests that it is heavy snow and its capacity to blanket the outside world and render it invisible that creates the feeling of intimacy and isolation within the house. Despite the geographical distance of Morgan’s Perth from Bachelard’s Europe and the differences between the two climates, there is a similar sense of isolation in Morgan’s narrative, with snow equalling social separation. The force of intimacy in *My Place* comes from inside the house and is connected to the family as sanctuary in much the same way as the families in *Cloudstreet* gather their sense of shelter from each other.

Morgan’s childhood house not only allowed her a sense of family security, it also gave her the opportunity to learn about her Aboriginal culture because extended family members were housed in the living space. This occurred despite Morgan’s initial lack of knowledge of her Aboriginal heritage. Morgan describes the way her
grandmother spent time educating her about the fauna that ventured into her suburban back yard. ‘I’d heard the bullfrog yesterday, it was one of Nan’s favourite creatures. She dug up a smaller, motley brown frog as well, and, after I inspected it, she buried it back safe in the earth. (p. 14)

The sense that the house of Morgan’s childhood shelters and provides privacy is tempered by an anxiety, on the part of her grandmother, about community judgements in relation to domesticity. For example, Morgan tells the story of her grandmother’s outrage at discovering that their English guest, Cyril had hung his shirt to dry over a rosebush in the front yard:

‘Will you just look where he’s put his shirt, look?’ Cyril’s shirt was spread out neatly across the rose-bush in the front of our yard. ‘It’s disgusting’, Nan said as she continued to eye him through the curtains. ‘Does he think that’s a clothes-line? Puttin’ his dirty old shirt where everyone can see. You mark my words, Sally, the neighbours’ll think there’s blackfellas living here!’(p. 122)

Anxiety about neighbours and their predicted reactions to circumstances within the Morgan home figures prominently in *My Place*. The grandmother’s anxiety about the family’s perceived domestic standards is related to her fear that her Aboriginality may be uncovered and that the family might be exposed to racism as a result. Nevertheless, an overarching sense of family closeness gathers about the house and renders these concerns secondary to the joy of living in this particular domestic space.

The Housing Commission house described by Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford (Ginibi) in *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, is, in some ways, similar to the representation of the house in *My Place*. Langford writes of her sense of cultural
isolation and the constant worry about judgements made by neighbours in relation to her domestic life. She states:

[I]f some relatives showed up for an occasional visit, when you went out to welcome them you could see your neighbours’ curtains move and many eyes upon you. After a while I felt guilty about having visitors. I wondered who’d be dobbing me in to the Commission if the visitors stayed overnight.104

In her autobiography, Langford describes her initial excitement at finally being allocated a family home by the Housing Commission. She details the joy experienced by her children as they chose their bedrooms and of her plan to plant out a garden in the backyard. However, the joy of moving into the house soon dissipates as Langford experiences the moral circumscription of her life that partners her occupation of the house. For example, she describes the government regulation of the length of time a visitor is allowed to be in her home. She remarks that these rules, in relation to who can enter her domestic space and the time they are allowed to remain there, remind her of the negative experience of mission life.

I found out that you were not supposed to create a nuisance or disturb any of the neighbours. You also weren’t able to have anyone come and stay without permission from the commission. It reminded me of the missions. The rule was useless in our culture, where survival often depended on being able to stay with friends and relatives. (p. 174)

Langford was one of only three or four Aboriginal families in the area and missed the opportunity to interact with other members of the Aboriginal community. Adding to these problems is the fact that the Housing Commission poorly maintained the house in Green Valley and Langford states that this is one of the main reasons for her leaving it. It is probable that differing regions of Australia offer distinct experiences of dwelling for Indigenous people. However, the experiences of Morgan and Langford mostly reflect the fact that Langford’s family,

104 Langford, Don’t Take Your Love to Town, p.176
in particular, was more visibly ‘Aboriginal’ according to racist stereotypes of ‘acceptable’ skin colour, and was subject to more negative encounters with the legal system.

Aboriginal representations of Indigenous dwelling in contemporary literature, such as those in the texts of Morgan and Langford reveal social, psychological, cultural and political aspects of living spaces that often stand in sharp contrast to the conventional trope of ‘The Great Australian Dream’. Mobility, racism, poverty and architectural improvisation are some of the common themes that recur in these biographically centred accounts of Aboriginal domestic spaces. These themes are also prominent in Indigenous fiction: they are revealed in Benang and Carpentaria through descriptions of houses and other more makeshift dwellings. Notions of the makeshift in Indigenous domestic architecture and how these ideas connect with the concept of shelter is a well-developed theme in both novels. Imagined Indigenous houses are always makeshift and although the same sense of make-do occurs in representations of non-Indigenous houses in the case of Indigenous living spaces, outside judgement attaches to them.

The house functions in both Benang and Carpentaria in the direct sense that living space acts as setting for the main characters. Scott’s novel is set in Western Australia and provides contrast to non-Indigenous novels set in this state such as Cloudstreet and Crush. While Crush and Cloudstreet both romanticise the makeshift vernacular Australian house, the Indigenous novels examined here represent the less romantic aspects of such dwellings. One government-run camp in Benang, for example, is ‘between the rubbish dump and the sanitation depot.
Whatever the time of day you breathed the town’s shit.’ (p. 317) Despite the concentration on the less romantic aspects of the house in both novels, the makeshift house is occasionally seen as poetic in accounts in *Benang* and *Carpentaria*. In *Carpentaria*, Normal’s room at the back of Number One house is as an ‘amber womb’ where ‘like autumn leaves, bad days fell away as though the genius of the room could not contain them.’ (p. 194) Similarly, in *Benang*, Harley describes the shelter that Sandy One and Fanny Benang find in the exterior world. ‘They slept in a shelter made of mallee branches woven and laced over a burrow in the ground. It was a nest they entered in darkness.’ (p. 465-466)

The makeshift is common to literary representations of the house in Australian fiction, in general. Nevertheless, representations of living spaces in *Benang* and *Carpentaria* share a sense of the makeshift at its most extreme and the political aspect of their construction is foregrounded. Often, political notions of the house are described in an almost offhand way with slight references to the poverty of the inhabitants illuminated through the choice of building materials, for example, or casual references to the destruction of Indigenous dwellings.

The centrality of the house as a theme varies across the novels *Benang* and *Carpentaria*. In *Benang*, for example, living space occupies a crucial role in symbolising and rendering explicit the postcolonial oppression of the Indigenous characters. The house rather than the exterior world is the setting for exploration of the themes of mobility, racism and poverty. This association of the house with oppression is also seen in *Cloudstreet* where the Aboriginal character is repelled by the house. By contrast, in *Carpentaria*, the role of the house is, at times, subsumed
by the centrality of the outside environment. Nevertheless, the living spaces described in Wright's novel also reveal the crucial differences in both the circumstances and the imagining of the domestic lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters from the perspective of an Indigenous author.

Some specific stories that attach to these themes are evidenced in both novels despite their disparate geographical locations and cultures. For example, in both narratives, Aboriginal people are compelled to live in close proximity to local rubbish dumps. Location and relocation is an important aspect of racist bureaucratic policies. Both novels suggest that the reception afforded by government and white communities to Aboriginal architecture is, to some extent, dependent on the location of such living spaces. Indigenous dwellings tend to be relocated as the spread of non-Indigenous inhabitants encroaches on land on which these abodes are constructed. Being in close proximity to white communities receives a negative response while locations within an area designated by bureaucracies or the white community as acceptable for Aboriginal dwellings receives approval. For example, the suggestion is made in both novels that houses built by Aboriginal characters would be depicted as a model of successful Aboriginal domestic space only if they remained sufficiently remote from the Euro-Australian dwellings. There are similar descriptions, in both novels, of the ways in which the makeshift dwelling is viewed through a bureaucratic lens. For example, bureaucratic approval for dwellings built by their occupiers using makeshift materials is described in *Carpentaria*. Angel Day is seen as an architect/builder who is a ‘genius in the new ideas of blackfella advancement.’ (p. 16). Bureaucratic people said she had ‘Go’. The irony of these comments is humorously described in the text. ‘She became a prime example of
government policies at work and to prove it, they came and took pictures of her with a Pentax camera for a report.’ (p. 16) This depiction of the bureaucratic approval of an Aboriginal house is similar to the reaction of an official of the Department of Native Affairs’ to Jack Chatalong’s makeshift home in *Benang*. In the case of Chatalong’s hut, its capacity to be held up as an inspiration to other Aboriginal dwellers is dependent on its being located away from townships that are dominated by Euro-Australian residents.

[S]omeone from the town complained about him and Kathleen living like that, on public land. A policeman and a public health inspector arrived together. The inspector reported that the hut was not fit for human habitation. (p. 136)

A further shared element of the physical structure of living spaces in the two novels concerns the commonality of makeshift architecture. In a previous chapter, I have argued that this is an element common to all contemporary representations of domestic space; however in *Benang* and *Carpentaria* the makeshift has a political dimension that is at odds with non-Indigenous depictions. In both *Benang* and *Carpentaria*, Indigenous houses demonstrate a sense of being constructed in an *ad hoc* manner, in part, as a consequence of racial discrimination, enacted through poverty and lack of access to building materials or experienced builders. However, the improvised nature of living spaces is also a consequence of the need for mobility brought about by bureaucratic intervention and the expectations of a dominant non-Indigenous community. This is the case for Sandy One and Fanny who are able to attain mobility and therefore escape Euro-Australian sanction by occupying a burrow that they build overnight. However, the usefulness of quickly built dwellings is not always related to bureaucratic intervention. In *Carpentaria*, the ability to quickly build or occupy a new dwelling helps to defuse community
feuding when Joseph Midnight’s relatives move overnight to a new location as a result of a dispute with Angel Day’s mob.

Although both *Benang* and *Carpentaria* represent living spaces as makeshift a subtle shift in its conceptualisation is evident in the latter novel. Where make-do housing, on occasion, has a lyrical dimension in *Benang*, a more deprecatory tone in the description of dwellings is utilised in *Carpentaria*. In *Benang*, there is a description of an unfinished home, ‘a shell to hold us’ that shelters despite its lack of flooring. (p. 409) In *Carpentaria*, the homes are more starkly described. The Pricklebush community, for example, is described as, ‘All choked up, living piled together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump.’ (p. 4) The natural, rather than lyrical, style of description is a common one in *Carpentaria* and adds to the sense that the narrative is oral in tone. There is a sense of ordinary conversation in *Carpentaria* that is reflected in the descriptions of home. Normal’s ‘fish’ room is the only poetically described living space in the text.

The two novels converge in their descriptions of living spaces in relation to the sense of shelter that attaches to them. *Benang* describes makeshift huts made of hessian and flattened tins and there is a sense that these dwellings are less fragile than their materials suggest. Jack Chatalong’s hut, for example, has a strong sense of shelter attached to it. It is described as a ‘sturdy hut, walled with hessian and flattened kerosene tins. A bit of maintenance and care, he thought, and it would easily outlast him.’ (p. 61) Similarly, Sandy One erects ‘a most firm and rigid humpy’. (p. 272) The fringe camp that is home to Normal Phantom and his family
in *Carpentaria*, suggests some desperation and a greater fragility because of the materials used in the construction of homes but those living spaces are also described as robust and this suggests some degree of shelter. Number One House, for example, constitutes the main depiction of Indigenous domestic dwelling in *Carpentaria*. It is a makeshift abode, variously described as an ‘igloo made of rubbish’ and a ‘never-ending rattling corrugated-iron shanty fortress.’ (p. 15, p. 12) The use of the term ‘fortress’ is the final descriptor and overrides the notion of the house as ‘rattling’. It suggests robustness. Similarly, car bodies used as living spaces are also described as fortresses. ‘Everyone knew of those little petrol sniffers living in fortresses of abandoned car bodies.’ (p. 326).

There are, however, subtle shifts in descriptions of improvised houses between *Benang* and *Carpentaria*. In *Benang*, the more lyrical descriptions of Aboriginal living spaces might be seen to reflect the fact that the protagonist, Harley, is romanticising his experience of the makeshift as a consequence of his search for connection to a dimension of his family heritage that has previously been denied to him; while in *Carpentaria* there has been less alienation from culture for the characters and therefore less romanticising. This difference has a stronger cultural influence than is superficially apparent. The Waanyi people have experienced some continuity of their culture whereas the Nyoongar people are engaged in a struggle to resurrect a fractured culture through an exploration of their history and a reconstruction of their language. Richard Martin states that ‘Waanyi people have enjoyed substantially uninterrupted access to their ancestral lands not withstanding the severe impacts of colonisation’. He also argues that the Waanyi people have experienced continuation of some laws, customs and the Waanyi language whereas
the Noongar people have experienced a greater impact on their culture from the settlement of relatively large numbers of non-Indigenous people, different types of land use and institutionalisation. These disparate experiences of cultural continuity where one has been stable and the other has been fragmented might account for the differences in descriptions of living spaces in the two novels.

A further distinction between the living spaces represented in the two novels relates to the timeframes in which they are situated. *Carpentaria* has a consistently contemporary setting whereas *Benang* encompasses both the past and the present. Despite these various time frames however, there is some similarity in the living spaces in the two novels. Indigenous houses, whatever their historical situation, are consistently makeshift. Number One House, for example, is described as consisting of ‘pieces of sheet iron, jerry cans, bits of car bodies, pieces of rope, logs, plastic, discarded curtains and old clothing.’ (p. 15) This makeshift abode acts as a good example to other Pricklebush residents who see it as ‘ingenious’ and erect similar houses. Similarly, in *Benang*, houses where Indigenous characters dwell are makeshift, Harley’s family home has its unfinished flooring; Sandy One and Jack Chattalong have huts constructed of hessian and kerosene tins and Kathleen and Jack have a house with an earth floor and seats made out of grasstrees.

There are some specific cultural differences in relation to living space in the two novels. In *Carpentaria*, elements of the placement of the house in relation to spiritual entities, such as the rainbow snake, have a significance that is absent in *Benang*. In Scott’s novel, loss of culture is a theme that attaches to dwelling; the

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houses in *Benang* most often act as sites of Nyoongar cultural fragmentation. In the case of Ern’s house there is a room with files devoted to the enactment of this fragmentation. By contrast, in *Carpentaria* the houses of Aboriginal characters are intimately connected with Waanyi culture. For example, Angel feels she must build her house overlooking water lilies:

‘I was born near lilies so I must see lilies,” she once told him, calmly pouting towards the waterlilies growing in the swamp at the back, and once that happened, not even a grappling pick would have plied another word about the matter from her own sweet lips.’ (p. 13)

This is a rewriting of the regional in which landmarks such as the lilies are given spiritual as well as topographical significance.

Contrasting writing styles and intentions are also evidenced in *Benang* and *Carpentaria*. These differences are often rendered explicit through the symbol of the house. Scott uses the house as a symbol for racism and the oppression of Nyoongar peoples. Dwelling in the house within the elastic boundaries of the white communities in this narrative normally involves being subjected to racist bureaucratic processes or community attitudes, and often it also involves personal harm. Furthermore, abodes outside the recognised borders of white communities such as Aboriginal reserves are also often un-sheltering. In fact, more sheltering and poetic space is most often found outside the house in the external environment.

Within the dunes, the scent of salt and the only peppermint leaves of our country, there you can sleep. You hear the many heartbeats among the rippling grasses, the many whispering voices, and your own is somewhere among them. (p. 140)

One of Scott’s purposes in *Benang* is to educate the reader in relation to the historical and ongoing oppression of Nyoongar people and their culture. *Carpentaria* appears far less concerned with representing a black reality to a white
reader. Where Scott’s narrative seems more disciplined, the more scattered approach Wright takes with narrative renders particular themes more obscure. She touches lightly on some aspects of Indigenous dwelling and, in general, a single sentence or phrase suggests, but does not explain, a complex social issue. One example is the part of the narrative that describes Joseph Midnight’s living circumstances. Although Joseph is given a ‘brand-new’ government house he does not live in it because it is ‘too good to use’. (p. 372) He states that the old lean-to home, constructed of tin and plastic is safer. Is he reacting to the government house in the same way as someone might place a ‘good’ dinner set in a display cabinet never to be used; or does the term ‘safe’ carry an abstruse weight? It is difficult to be certain what is meant here as Wright provides little context for Joseph’s attachment to the more makeshift house. However, the idea that the roughly constructed abode is a better living space is a theme that resonates throughout *Carpentaria*. It is reminiscent of the way in which William’s crooked wooden childhood home in *The White Earth* was viewed by his father as stronger than brick houses built on concrete foundations.

*Carpentaria* also uses a light narrative touch when the narrative refers to Angel’s concern that some of her neighbours have moved across town to a new camp. She makes the simple statement, ‘No tap, no tap! So how are they going to get water for them mob then?’ (p. 38) Angel’s brief exchange with the delegation from the council alludes to a major issue in relation to Indigenous housing in remote areas; access to a suitable and adequate supply of water. A 2008 review of the impact of housing infrastructure on Indigenous health nominates adequate access to water for drinking and general household use as a crucial factor in maintaining and
improving the health of Aboriginal people living in remote and rural areas. However, the context of Angel’s anxiety about water supply remains unexplored.

Although weighty explanations are absent in *Carpentaria*, particular descriptions of the houses do convey significant themes in Aboriginal dwelling, particularly in relation to living in camps. The phrase, ‘Number One House’ for example, reflects the position of Normal Phantom as an elder and a spokesperson within the Pricklebush community, but it is also a sardonic title for a dwelling that is understood by its inhabitants to be necessarily constructed from the discarded rubbish of white society. The complex meanings underlying the title afforded by characters to the house in the novel underscore the effects of poverty and racism experienced by Aboriginal peoples. Similarly, in *Benang*, a hut built and occupied by Jack Chatalong is described as ‘an irregular and secret home’. (p. 61) The adjective ‘irregular’ refers to the fact that Jack is an itinerant worker and is, therefore, often necessarily absent from his abode. The term ‘secret’ relates to the way in which Aboriginal characters in Scott’s narrative are often ‘moved on’ by government forces such as the Protector of Aborigines and Fisheries because of seemingly whimsical and contrary reasons. An example is the way that Jack Chatalong’s hut is judged on its location. This hut becomes a locus of complaint because it occupies a space designated as public on the outskirts of town. It is then declared a shining example of what can be achieved by Indigenous dwellers when Jack is forced to dismantle it and re-erect it on reserve land. Under circumstances such as these, maintaining secrecy about the location of one’s abode becomes

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desirable to the Indigenous community as the means of avoiding bureaucratic interference. The simple description of Chatalong’s house as both ‘secret’ and ‘irregular’ carries a great weight behind it. It points to the way in which Indigenous peoples might differ from the non-Indigenous population in their responses to and feelings about the house. It also speaks to the way Benang’s author Kim Scott uses language to illuminate the Indigenous postcolonial experience through the trope of domestic space.

The descriptions of Number One House reflect Angel’s personality. As a character she is as contradictory as the descriptions of the house. However, the chaotic construction of Number One House with its jumbled building materials is not reflected in Angel’s personality. Her life only really becomes chaotic after she leaves that dwelling. Following the destruction of her second home she has no real sense of shelter. She is ultimately lost in the world without her house. This sense of being lost is elucidated in a letter received by her loved ones: ‘The letter read that Angel shares her home, an abandoned grey warehouse with others like herself who had lost trust in humankind.’ (p. 454) Although the warehouse is described as a ‘home’, the description is misleading as there is no comfort or shelter there for her. The improvised and potentially impermanent nature of many of the living spaces in both Benang and Carpentaria conveys a sense of the fragile position of the Indigenous characters within the dominant Euro-Australian culture. Houses and lives are potentially fragile despite the descriptions of houses as being sturdy and fortress-like. Both novels contain accounts of Indigenous characters whose houses are destroyed or ordered to be dismantled by government authorities or white community members. Improvised architecture here is not an adventure or a
romantic preference as in Cloudstreet and Crush. Whilst in Benang, the makeshift nature of Fanny Benang’s shelters reflect the way in which she travels around the South-West, most improvised structures are a response to extreme poverty and racism.

However, the common understanding of fragility, a potential vulnerability in terms of architecture, is turned on its head in Wright’s narrative in much the same way as it is in The White Earth. The impermanence of the dwellings is often advantageous from the perspective of mobility. It is the extremely makeshift nature of the Aboriginal dwellings that makes this level of mobility possible. It is also the case that the makeshift nature of the houses means that they are easily rebuilt. Furthermore, the perceived fragility of the houses in the camps creates a type of sanctuary for the community of Pricklebush because interfering and, sometimes, dangerous Uptown citizens are reluctant to enter what they see as a ‘monstrosity ramshackle deathtrap of a house’. (p. 42)

Fragile and makeshift housing also promotes community in Carpentaria. Everyone is connected and there is a facility for easily altering houses to accommodate new family members. Conversations between family members are overheard and commented on by the community. For example, a private conversation between Normal and Angel results in the old people suggesting to each other that Angel ‘has airs for a woman.’ (p. 17) In Number One House there are no locked doors. The idea of listening to and commenting on private conversations is seen as natural. For example, after the visit of the town delegation to Pricklebush, Normal and Angel return to the house: ‘Normal could have slapped her hard across the face. Everyone
was egging him on to do it. *Go on, go on, you tell her to shut the fuck up...’* (p. 42)

These minor voices allow for a further perspective on issues such as Angel’s behaviour to be afforded to the reader. The idea that a sense of community is enacted through close proximity and thin walls is not a uniquely Indigenous understanding of makeshift architecture. The connection between community and the makeshift abode is explored, in classic novels such as Kylie Tennant’s *The Battlers*. ¹⁰⁷ It is also represented in *Cloudstreet* where community is contained within the house and thin walls mean that Oriel overhears Rose crying, for example. However, here there remains a clear sense that privacy is a desirable feature of domestic dwelling. For example, in *Cloudstreet*, the separation of the two families within the house, for the purpose of maintaining privacy, is established by locking particular internal doors. There is a suggestion in *Carpentaria* that not being in a camp where community is so close is a lonely life. The narrator speaks of the widely spaced out houses of Uptown.

Beautiful mango blossoms filled the air wafting down the broad streets into the widely spaced-out houses and passing through the many spare allotments in between. And inside sat the lonely spinster women crocheting and knitting blankets or repairing holes in the net made by seagulls.’ (p. 83)

In the makeshift Number One House the walls of the houses allow sound to be carried over a considerable distance. In fact, Will Phantom comments on the advantages of hearing who is coming long before they arrive.

The house was quiet, and Will, knowing his father was able to identify a person approaching the house from the distance of a kilometre from the sound of their movement, was pleased there had been no one around in the late afternoon. (p. 195)

In circumstances where knowing who might be coming to the house while they are still a kilometre away might be useful for avoiding danger, or unwanted bureaucratic intervention, this is an advantage of the makeshift house.

Joseph Midnight has been given a house by the government, rumoured to have been a payment for cooperating with the mining interests in the area. However, he continues to live in the fragile structure built of tin and plastic that has been his home for many years because he sees it as a safe place, a sanctuary. The government house remains empty. The house is presumably located in the ‘white’ part of town and loss of community might figure in Midnight’s decision not to live in Uptown as much as his reasoning that the house should not be occupied because it is ‘too good’. In this way, shelter in Carpentaria seems connected to community, one of the conditions for settlement.

The themes of imposed mobility and the need to (re)build living spaces are represented in both novels. This is evidenced in Benang, for example, in Fanny Benang’s continual need to move from one living space to another, often as a result of government demands. This requirement for mobility on behalf of Harley’s ancestors leads to a fragmented history that Harley tries to repair throughout the narrative. Another mini-narrative exposes the vulnerability of those occupying reserves, particularly those within ever-expanding town boundaries. Tommy witnesses the destruction of one of these living spaces that Aboriginals necessarily inhabited. ‘He saw humpies bulldozed into heaps, and aflame, and people – Nyoongars – being pushed into the police wagons.’(p. 405) Similarly, in Carpentaria, a reference to Pricklebush’s camp homes needing to be rebuilt after
Desperance council ‘flattens the lot’ is located within a conversation by Uptown residents about the setting up of a new Indigenous campsite. (p. 36). The subtle restraint of this minor narrative creates the impression that the destruction of the fringe camp is not an uncommon occurrence. As town clerk Libby Valance comments, ‘The last time the council did it…they just started rebuilding because they had nowhere else to go.’ (p. 36) Ultimately, the plan to destroy the campsite is defeated by its fragile and makeshift nature. The makeshift nature of these dwellings and the fact that it makes it possible for them to be quickly rebuilt has the effect of making Indigenous living spaces simultaneously fragile and robust, which might explain the contradictory style of their descriptions, as simultaneously shanties and fortresses, in *Carpentaria*. Number One House is sufficiently robust to allow a sense of continuity in the life of Angel Day. She remains in the house for approximately five years. Similarly, it seems probable that Angel would have remained in the house she occupies after she leaves Number One House if it had not been destroyed by Bruiser and Truthful. The loss of this home compels Angel out into the exterior world where she encounters danger in the form of a truck driver. ‘Her fate, bizarre and twisted it seemed, had arrived out of hell, in the form of a shiny black road train, hauled by a Mack truck.’ (p. 453)

In both novels more makeshift living space is seen as having a greater capacity to provide shelter than a conventional abode. Harley, for example, experiences a greater sense of sanctuary gathered around a campfire in the bush with his uncles than he ever finds in his grandfather’s substantial house. He also comments on a camp set up by his relatives.
Late in the day, when they stopped, shelter quickly grew. Some places it was something draped over a buggy to block the wind while the buggy kept off any rain. Or it might be a tent, or a wall of bushes. There were rushes or bark woven through sticks jammed upright in the earth, and small bush shelters leaning each side of a tent, with a leaky roof reaching out to the fire. (p. 278)

In *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard maintains that humans create a virtual as well as a real house from their storehouse of individual memories and collective experiences of domestic space. In a similar way Number One House is a virtual house and an actual one. However, in *Carpentaria*, the house itself dictates the experience of its occupants. Normal Phantom describes this agency:

[He] knew a house made its own life, regardless of the family who chose to live within its walls. Why was it? Ever since the day his house grew to be an eyesore on the landscape, the place felt as though it was always ready for a fight. (p. 111)

The idea of the house having agency is not specific to Indigenous representations of living space; however, conventionally, any spiritual agency is enacted through the medium of a ghostly ‘once human’ presence that is attached to the house. For example, in *Cloudstreet*, the haunting of the oppressive library has its origins in the death of a young Aboriginal girl who committed suicide, and an old lady who died in the room. *Carpentaria* depicts an agency that is embedded in the house and acts on the occupants in a material way, for example, by making Normal’s bones ache. (p. 13) Furthermore, in *Carpentaria*, this agency is presented as normal rather than uncanny.

Just as Angel’s house exuded lust, Norm Phantom’s evoked terrible feelings of loathing from the great minds, who like the black cockatoos in flight overhead, only saw it from a distance. (p. 349).

This belief is not confined to the Indigenous inhabitants of Pricklebush it is shared between all the people of Desperance.

Such houses are regarded as being so strange, like the Phantom house with its twisty corridor of corrugated iron, it bestowed significant powers on the
minds of Uptown. They claimed it would conquer those it conjured into its grasp. (p. 349)

Normal Phantom worries about the safety of his children living within the house and feels that the serpent might trick them. He also has concerns for his own health because of the location of the house on top of the nest. Similarly, Angel Day’s behaviour, and indeed the behaviour of all who pass by another of the houses in the narrative is determined to a large extent by the will of the house. The Uptown grey fibro house with ‘sad and sorry walls’ that Angel Day moves into with Mozzie Fishman is a complex place capable of inducing loneliness and lust. The house’s capacity to induce sexual desire is so potent that it affects animals that enter into its space. ‘Dogs and cats on heat stopped each evening to mate in the yard.’ (p. 337) It is also a space where miracles occur. For example, Angel attributes the house with making possible the birth of her two sons. ‘This was why she too thought it was a house of miracles. ‘For goodness’ sake, from it materialised the birth of two boys at her age and he, an old man.’(p. 337) This agency can affect not only those within the house and those intimately attached to it but also those who are only loosely connected such as passersby or people thinking about the house.

However, the power of Angel Day’s second home, the grey fibro house, is limited. The attempt to eradicate its apparent influence is similar to that in the novel *Cloudstreet* in the sense that it involves a physical dismantling. In Winton’s narrative an external wall is partially demolished and a window is installed. The light acts as a catalyst to vanquish the ghost. However, In *Carpentaria*, the house is completely destroyed by Bruiser, Uptown’s mayor, and Truthful, the town’s police officer in an effort to overcome their feelings of being disconcerted by the
mysterious atmosphere of the house. ‘In the shadowy walls, the ghosts of rosaries watched, while the two men worked desperately hard to destroy its incomprehensible meaning, its contents, its beliefs.’ (p. 339)

Non-Indigenous notions of Aboriginal dwelling are described in similar ways in both *Carpentaria* and *Benang*. In both novels, Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters have an unquestioned understanding that the right to occupy particular living spaces is subject, firstly, to an imposed hierarchy and secondly, to particular conditions of living. Non-Indigenous members of the community have the right to occupy and build on land wherever they choose. A belief in Terra Nullius is briefly described in the narrative of *Carpentaria*: ‘The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all.’ (p. 4) An expectation exists that Aboriginal dwellings be maintained at a distance from white communities unless the Aboriginal dwellers adopt a ‘white’ mode of dwelling. Bruiser, the Mayor in *Carpentaria* asserts the view that Aboriginal people who want to live in Uptown ‘should live like everyone else then.’ (p. 37) This belief, along with other racist attitudes, combines to disadvantage Indigenous characters. This is articulated in *Carpentaria* through an exchange between Normal Phantom, who is seen as a leader of the Aboriginal people of Desperance, and a small delegation of concerned citizens of Uptown:

> They said they wanted him to get those people who had moved out of Westside, and were now living in abandoned car bodies and their makeshift camps behind people’s housing, to start living like white people, if they wanted to live in town. (p. 37)

Bruiser’s argument that the Waanyi people of Desperance should be put to work making bathtubs ‘so they could take regular baths’ is clearly racist as is his
assertion that they should also spend their time making keys so that they could lock their food up and not have to share it with everyone. (p. 35-36) This notion of racial segregation is reinforced by the depiction, in *Carpentaria*, of a ‘net’ that extends around Uptown, the Euro-Australian part of Desperance. The function of the net is to separate Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of Desperance. ‘Wasn’t the net supposed to be there for the purposes of protecting the town against encroachment from people who were not like themselves?’ (p. 33-34).

In *Benang*, there is no obvious ‘net’. However, there are frequent references to the intrusion on the lives of the Indigenous community brought about by postcolonial settlement and these are often couched as problems to do with living spaces, particularly, their location. Even when Aboriginal people are moved onto reserves and settlements, they become an issue for the Euro Australians eventually.

The residents of nearby houses – some of which had windows facing the reserve – believed the place to be shameful; the idle people, little children, the shabby huts and tents, the untidiness and squalor of it all. (p. 136)

Often, the building of a Euro-Australian house marks the beginning of the destruction of the Indigenous traditional way of life. ‘The place had grown first a homestead, then a telegraph office, police station, store, pubs. Here and there, our own people, begging.’ (p. 481)

*Benang* contains fictional accounts of Indigenous dwellings that convey the themes of separation and assimilation policies. As part of the agenda of assimilation, standards of cleanliness and maintenance are imposed on Indigenous people. For example, Kathleen is careful to keep the floors of the home she shares with Ern polished in case anyone should judge her as less than satisfactory as a housewife.
Similarly, when bureaucrats inspect Sandy Mason’s house they comment that although he keeps the house in good order ‘no attempt is made to cultivate the ground surrounding the house.’ (p. 41) The Assimilation policy is also administered through rules about having Indigenous relatives and friends as visitors.

Mobility is a feature of domestic dwelling for many of the Indigenous characters and this is central to Scott’s agenda in illustrating the politics of separation of Indigenous characters from mainstream society. It also compels Aboriginal characters to disconnect from each other, which illustrates the fragmentation of Indigenous culture, a state that Harley is trying to correct in the narrative through his exploration of his history. Mobility of characters is not unique to Indigenous fiction. In *The Memory Room*, for example, the characters are mobile and occupy a number of different houses. However, in *Benang*, government forces, on many occasions, dictate movement. This is the case, for example, when Jack Chatalong and his house are moved to a reserve.

Shelter/sanctuary in *Benang* is more likely to be found outside the type of house normally resided in by Euro-Australians. Indigenous characters who dwell in these houses are likely to encounter violence. For example, there is the house that Kathleen and Ern settle in. It is here that Ern rapes both Kathleen and her daughter. Other family members such as Tommy are also affected by witnessing this violence. The narrator states that: ‘Tommy stumbled in the dark house and saw his mother, half-prone on the floor, her hands tied to the foot of his father’s bed.’ (p. 369) ‘The house called the ‘house of Ern’ by Harley references its domination by Ernest Scat. Here there is no privacy for Tommy or his new wife as Ern insists on
entering rooms without knocking: ‘Ern would barge into Tommy and his new wife’s cramped bedroom, as if to prove he owned the place.’ (p. 405) The boarding house is also a site of violence where Harley is subject to Ern’s physical and sexual abuse. This lack of privacy also indicates a lack of shelter within the house given Ern’s propensity to rape his fellow dwellers.

In *Carpentaria*, the house is also a complex space, however, here sanctuary is more likely to be found within the confines of domestic space despite a seemingly fragile construction. This is largely because the exterior world is comparatively threatening. For example, Mozzie Fishman warns his Aboriginal followers, to heed his warning and become inconspicuous to the police when they are outdoors to avoid being caught by them. He states:

> I am not talking about that useless, invisible Desperance kinda net, I am talking about the real ones, just as invisible, thrown out by the police who are wanting to squash people like you, like you is merely a nuisance of a mosquito. (p. 419)

Furthermore, female Aboriginal characters are likely to be subjected to sexual violence when outside the house.

The historical narrative of the interaction between Euro-Australian and Indigenous peoples in *Benang* presents a continual revision of boundaries and rights in relation to ownership that advantages the non-Indigenous community. The unarticulated idea of Terra Nullius is used to doubly disadvantage Nyoongar people. Firstly, they are pushed off their own land and then when they try to return after white communities have established themselves they are seen to be the intruders:

> Starr’s customers certainly believed they knew all about those others, those dark ones camped on the fringes of towns, edging closer and having to be
chased away; away from the school shops and oval, off the footpath, off the fence, away from the water trough, away to the tips. (p. 312)

Similarly, Harriette Coolman is forced from her husband’s house because the lease is extinguished when he dies. Harriette, who claims to be a ‘quadroon’, has no right to her husband’s property because of her perceived status as Aboriginal. The desire for the Euro-Australian community to acquire Coolman’s land for use as a water catchment area is realised through racist government policy. In this way the house symbolises the futility of trying to adopt a mode of living that would satisfy the requirement for Aboriginal people to live in a similar manner to non-Indigenous people. Yet, the house is intimately connected to status. One of the criteria for Indigenous characters set by the Chief Protector of Aborigines and Fisheries, for entering a pub, concerns the mode of living of the ‘native’ applicant. This includes the state of the living space in which the applicant resides, its perceived cleanliness, as well as who visits the house. Similarly, the non-Indigenous storekeeper, Mr. Starr, tricks Harry Cuddles by offering him a mortgage and subsequently selling this land to members of his (Starr’s) own family. Harry’s legal right to contest the illegal transaction is compromised because his Indigenous status means that he would not ‘cut much of a figure in court.’ (p. 314) These reclamations of Indigenous dwellings drive the narrative forward as they compel the Indigenous characters outwards from the house and help to create a sense of fragmentation that is at the heart of Harley’s need to search out his history. Benang’s main theme of loss of culture is, to a large extent, articulated through these narratives of generations of displacement.
The physical structure of the house is central to the themes of racism, disintegration of culture and the search for an Indigenous history presented in *Benang*. For example, descriptions of the structure of the house in *Benang* act as metaphors related to postcolonial aspects of dwelling as an Indigenous Australian. Scott maintains that he has played with metaphor throughout the novel and Harley’s act of opening up the house is an example of this. Harley states: ‘I began chipping at the render from the stone walls of the old house. I hesitate to mention it; in the context of this story it may seem so dreadfully *symbolic.*’ (p. 24) He also utilises structural elements of the house such as the guttering to anchor himself to the earth and symbolically counter his grandfather’s attempts to “uplift” him. (p.147) Similarly, during his recovery from a car accident, Harley wakes to find that he is bumping against and constrained by the ceiling of his grandfather’s house which is described as being white and superficial.

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and I thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except - right in front of my eyes – a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation. (p. 11)

The description of the ceiling can be read, because of Scott’s propensity to play with metaphors associated with colour, as a comment about Harley’s view of European Australians and their policies. Certainly, the majority of non-Indigenous characters in the text match the description of superficiality. Harley’s deliberate acts of destruction of grandfather’s house symbolise his challenging of and rejection of aspects of non-Indigenous culture. He literally picks out the mortar and exposes the ‘bones’ of the house. Light and, more importantly, enlightenment, floods in as a result. Harley alternatively ‘deconstructs’ the house through the act

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of chipping away at the mortar and later repairs some of the structural damage he has caused. Harley’s ambiguous attitude to his grandfather’s house is partly connected to its capacity to reveal his own painful, but revelatory, family history. He is aware that his grandfather’s office contains a certain type of truth and hides another. He states that: ‘It was necessary to go further back, but within those walls I could only go so far.’ (p. 32)

However, the relationship between the house and Indigenous characters in Benang is complex. When Harley spends time deconstructing the house by picking away at the mortar, removing the floorboards and opening up the roof, his uncles Jack and William are displeased with him. Harley repairs the damage he has done to the house under the watchful gaze of his uncles but leaves a gap between the stones where it creates a pleasant or interesting intersection with the outdoors. So the house is restored but in a way that enhances its relationship to the external environment and makes it seem more like Harley’s house than Ern’s. In fact, due to Harley’s ‘uplifting’, his capacity to float upwards, his uncles suggest that he stay inside the house and write as a way of anchoring himself. The capacity for the house to shelter is also recognised here despite the fact that much of Harley’s existence in the house has been associated with abuse.

The metaphorical also attaches to Ern’s actions. He constructs elements within the house such as shelves and these contain a particular constructed history. Harley asks the reader to:

Consider him with his hand deep in the filing system, among shelves he’d helped construct. See him staring – as certain members of his future wife’s family continue to do – down a corridor of words. (p. 38)
Scott also plays with the notion of European building as a type of self-congratulatory activity in *Benang*. He creates a double vision of Ern as a builder. He is either industrious or a masturbator depending on the view of him sawing timber. ‘As she approached him Kathleen studied his shadow; head forward on the neck, back bowed, and one hand working rapidly to and fro between the legs.’ (p. 72-73)

In *Benang*, the houses themselves are connected to the written word, language and loss. This is seen, for example, in the description of Ern’s records about Harley’s family within the house but is also articulated in terms of building materials. ‘Together they glanced down another dusty corridor, one walled with the words of flour bags, metal containers pressed flat, and the many labels – Lucifer Matches Kiwi Polish White Washer Velvet Soap Mrs Williams Pink Pills for Pale People Seigels Syrup Bile Beans… Looking for me, between even such walls of words as these.’ (p. 485)

As well as the architecture of the house *Benang* and *Carpentaria* use common European domestic items as symbols. Mirrors, for example, are important in *Benang*. They are a means of assessing the self and questioning identity. They are also used to convey a sense of history for Harley and a sense that a person is made up of all those who come before. Harley states, ‘I looked for ancestors in the mirror.’ (p. 161) Where Harley’s act of gazing into the mirror is a search for Aboriginality, Topsy and Jack’s is a ‘gloomy’ questioning of essentialised characteristics of Aboriginality.
Separately, neither speaking of it to the other, Jack Chatalong and Kathleen Scat would face their gloomy and distorted reflections. They considered their noses, lips, skin, wondered at the lesser brain capacity – according to what they read – allowed by their skulls. (p. 138)

Mirrors are also described as tools for attempts to rectify those aspects of the body that are seen to increase the likelihood of recognition as Aboriginal.

I was not the only one to have used a mirror. Uncle Jack told me how he used to have one hung up in the boughshed he and Harriette shared among the peppermint trees, not long after the war years. He told me he used to pinch his nostrils together. (p. 160)

For Topsy, the mirror represents her failure to become ‘white.’ When she looks into it she notes her own disintegration. ‘There were increasing areas of blackness, more pieces missing and making her invisible.’ (p. 161) She is negated, rendered invisible, by her failure to be recognised as assimilated at the same time as her Aboriginality is exposed.

Domestic items act as symbols of the politics of colonial oppression. Tea, for example, is used as a reference to the assimilation agenda. ‘The same dark, milky liquid from the same one pot.’ (p. 73) Teacups are significant in much the same way. Kathleen is urged, over a cup of tea, to think about marriage to Ern. It is argued that the attraction, for Kathleen, of this arrangement is in the attainment of a domestic life. ‘You could have a home of your own. A house like this. Cups like these.’ (p. 74) The fact that Kathleen can never achieve the same status as a white wife is also articulated through the metaphor of the teacup. ‘The same best china, although hers was chipped at the rim so that one blood red rose was completely missing.’ (p.73)
Similarly, in *Carpentaria*, domestic items take on special meaning. The old clock that Angel finds at the rubbish tip is used to convey a sense of how items that seem common in Euro-Australian houses might take on a special significance in Indigenous lives. The clock connects the Phantom family directly with the capacity to have control over time in the sense of hours and minutes. This means that the Phantom children can get to school on time. The clock is also significant because Angel believes that it will give her a financial advantage over other poor people. For Angel, prosperity is definitely the province of those who reside in Euro-Australian houses but she believes she might accumulate some of that wealth by impressing her spiritual ancestors with her devotion to the Catholic God. She enacts this devotion by placing a Madonna statue, found at the tip, (which she has painted to resemble an Aboriginal woman) overlooking her bed in the belief that it will bring her the luck of the white people. When a delegation from the council turns up to encourage Normal Phantom to help disperse the camp Angel brandishes the Madonna in the belief that it also represents respectability. In this way the narrative transforms common European objects to signify cultural differences between the Indigenous Phantom family and the Euro-Australian residents of Uptown. Angel’s appropriation of non-Indigenous artefacts that might be found in non-Indigenous domestic spaces and her act of attributing special powers to them constitutes a redefinition of the domestic that is peculiarly Indigenous.

The place of the environment in an Indigenous world as opposed to a non-Indigenous one is foregrounded in both novels through the trope of the house. In *Benang*, natural dwelling spaces such as Fanny Benang’s burrow are described as more sheltering spaces than many houses conventionally built by Euro-Australians.
The power of nature over built structures is a particularly potent idea in *Carpentaria* where non-Indigenous dwellings are described as suffering the effects of the environment.

The winds squeezed through every crack and hole to loosen sheets of corrugated iron for the salt in the air to rust nails that went pop, until all those old pieces of tin whined, whistled, banged and clapped. (p. 56)

The environment makes such houses and their occupants somewhat ridiculous.

Lying flat out like a corpse on the bare linoleum floor in the hallway of a house exactly like the one next door. Capturing in a long sigh of appreciation the northern sea breezes that came waltzing straight over twenty-five kilometres of mudflats, whistling their arrival through the front door while, on the way out, slamming the back door open and shut. (p. 8)

The weather has the potential not only to make obvious the architectural flaws of the house it also has the power to render such living spaces redundant. This notion is explored within the narrative in the form of a hurricane. The catastrophic event that is the denouement of the narrative is a sort of ‘payback’, a vengeance enacted by Joseph Midnight, upon the town of Desperance. Will Phantom, caught in the hotel in the middle of the hurricane, becomes conscious of other entities in the rooms. One of these is a man who is summoning the storm:

He envisaged the back of a man who was bending over, performing a ritual with wreaths of rain grass to bring the storm to them, who in his heart of hearts Will guessed was old Joseph. (p. 480)

The cyclone’s effect on the local hotel is described as similar to a sledgehammer ‘trying to tear it apart.’ (p. 480) However, the elders prove that they are capable of surviving catastrophic weather, climbing ‘out of their damp bedding on the ground where they had slept through the cyclone.’ (p. 51)

At times, these references to the environment and its effects on Euro-Australian domestic architecture reflect the postcolonial nature of the narratives. For example,
both Scott and Wright question the notion of settlement through the building of houses of Euro-Australian construction. In *Carpentaria* the hurricane destroys these more substantial houses as easily as it does the more makeshift homes of the Phantom family. In *Benang* non-Indigenous buildings are described as falling to their knees.

The wind kipped and spun on vacant blocks, slapped at the houses shedding iron warping boards. Some of the buildings leaned, and fell to the ground very slowly, one corner at a time, as if dropping to their knees first. (p. 140 - 141)

This contrasts with Scott’s descriptions of sturdy and long-lasting Indigenous built abodes so that the idea of permanency in settlement is dispelled.

The trope of a powerful and, even, vengeful nature is common in literature. An example here is the role that Shakespeare ascribes to the climate in the form of an avenging storm in *The Tempest*.\(^{109}\) This theme is also common in Australian literature. Patrick White’s novel *The Eye of The Storm* is an example.\(^{110}\) However, in *Carpentaria*, there is a suggestion that nature is effected through the capacities of certain Aboriginal people and is specifically attached to the culturally attained power of elders such as Old Joseph Midnight. As the hurricane rages through the town, the publican clings to the wooden bar as if to a lover while Midnight summons the storm. The attachment of Uptown’s community to physical structures such as a proposed statue of a bull and the love of a bar counter are revealed as folly in the face of both nature and the power of Aboriginal elders like Joseph Midnight.


Both *Carpentaria* and *Benang* work to dispel some of the common misperceptions about Aboriginal domestic architecture by describing the robustness of seemingly fragile and makeshift dwelling spaces. While the makeshift in many dwellings is seen as robust it contrasts with the non-Indigenous in that these living spaces are often described as fragile. The novels also write back to colonial perceptions of settlement with their depictions of deteriorating non-Indigenous houses where loneliness and lack of consideration of the climate take their toll. They insist on a postcolonial view of European Australian houses through their depictions of various domestic spaces where they foreground the effects of colonialism on the daily lives of Indigenous characters. Furthermore, they utilise the trope of the house to elucidate Aboriginal conditions of poverty and the consequences of unwelcome government intrusion and surveillance. Ultimately, these novels rewrite the idea of the house by articulating Indigenous perspectives of living space.
Chapter Three

Inside and outside: The Gendered House

The lives of women and children in fictional domestic space are often depicted as conditioned by a seemingly intrinsic coupling of domesticity and femininity. However, this is certainly the case for white Australian women and children. However, Mezei and Briganti warn against an ‘unexamined yoking’ of the feminine and the domestic because of the danger that it might limit understandings of both the house and women. Susan Lever is also concerned about the potential to limit or simplify argument in relation to representations of gender when she states that an obvious gap in feminist literary enquiry relates to narratives where male writers adopt what might be seen as a feminist perspective. This chapter examines desire for the house and desire to escape it from the perspectives of both male and female characters. It addresses the concerns of Mezei and Briganti as well as Lever through an examination of male desire for the domestic and female desire for the outside world. It also examines notions of claustrophobia and reconciliation in relation to the house by considering how characters in contemporary fiction exit and return to the house. The house is a potent site for the consideration of ways in which gender might be represented because of its association, over time with gender division and because of its centrality in most people’s lives.

112 Bird. “Mother I won’t never go Drovin’”: Motherhood in Australian Narrative”, p. 43.
While a great deal of attention has been paid to the way notions of gender frame Australian narratives, there has been scant consideration of gendered readings of the house in contemporary Australian fiction. Articles by Delys Bird and Elizabeth Ferrier, written in the 1980s are exceptions here. In particular, there are few readings (apart from that of Ferrier) about the relationship of men to the Australian house. The negotiation of, and contradiction to, gendered mores that exist within the boundaries of the house, as described in Australian novels and short stories, provides a compelling field for enquiry into contemporary Australian representations of gender grounded in distinctly Australian settings. One of the major arguments in relation to gender in this chapter is reflected in Bird’s article in *Westerly* in 1989. (p. 47) Bird’s work is explicitly concerned with the implications of gender in its exploration of feminine domestic life in Australian narratives. She examines four texts by well-known Australian writers, Patrick White, Thomas Keneally and Jessica Anderson and argues that female characters can escape the house, domestic life and the role of mothering ‘only if they are exceptionally determined to do so and the costs of escape are high.’ (p. 47) Ferrier’s article is pertinent too as it provides a basis for the examination of the idea of claustrophobia in relation to the house from the position of male and female characters.

Each of the novels that form the basis of this chapter challenges representations of the feminine and the masculine based on what might otherwise be a potentially limiting perspective of the home and family as a producer of gender. These novels portray characters who interact with both the domestic and public realms as

115 Bird. pgs. 43-51.
complex individuals. They all challenge a simple reading of masculine and feminine engagement with the house. As opposed to traditional stereotypes, many of the female characters assume a rational relationship to the house while some male characters have an emotional and sentimental connection. The characters represented in these novels however, do, in many ways, conform to traditional expectations of their sex. Female characters tend to regard housework and the raising of children as their primary responsibility. This is the case for Jenny and her mother as well as for Iris in *The Great World*, for Rose and Oriel in *Cloudstreet* and for Margaret in *The Children*. It is also the case for Angel Day in *Carpentaria* (up until the denouement of her narrative). Similarly, Harriette Coolman in *Benang*, is concerned with household activities, however, her Aboriginality gives these tasks added weight because she is especially likely to be judged on the basis of her cleanliness. ‘She kept the house as clean as anyone – lest they ever doubt - and she washed and stitched, organized and sheltered those she could; we survivors.’ (p. 56)

Of course, these characters, particularly Rose Pickles, Harriette Coolman and Oriel Lamb reflect the era in which they are situated in the novel. *Cloudstreet*, for example, is set in the 1950s in a conservative sphere. However, in both this novel and *The Great World*, in particular, ideas of traditional gendered roles are rendered complex because of the interaction of men with the house. The novels *The Children* and *The Memory Room* also complicate traditional gendered mores as they include women who have chosen not to have children and who do not assume a major role in the domestic world. Erika and Connie in *The Memory Room* and Mandy in *The Children* both have careers in public space and spend less time in the house than female characters in the other novels and this reflects a more contemporary image of Australian womanhood. It also creates dynamic characters especially in the case
of Erika who vacillates at one point between her desires for domestic and public life.

As Susan Martin states, gender is one of the social and cultural constructs that facilitate an understanding of the world. Yet, any exploration of the representation of domestic space through the lens of gender is potentially problematic because, as Martin points out, other social parameters such as class, race and ethnicity may be as influential as gender in determining the production of spaces. It is necessary, therefore, to take account of social complexities such as race and class, in the examination of gender in relation to the space of the house. Race and privilege, for example, often intersect with gender to produce particular representations of domestic space. However, the novels considered in this chapter demonstrate that, at least in the case of contemporary Australian fiction, gender often transcends race and privilege as the main factor determining how characters interact with the space of the house except in the case of Aboriginal characters in *Benang*. The works of fiction of this thesis encompass a broad representation of gender, race and social privilege in their settings, characters and preoccupations. Male and female characters are represented across the novels, which are written by both male and female authors. A spectrum of social privilege and disadvantage is also represented. In *Cloudstreet* there are frequent references to the poverty of the characters, but their collective social disadvantage does not compare with the childhood of Vic in *The Great World* or that of the Indigenous characters of *Carpentaria* whose poverty is profound. *The Children*, in contrast, explores the

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lives of contemporary characters who enjoy comparatively affluent social and economic advantages. The relative wealth of characters is reflected in the domestic spaces available to them. Mandy, for example, occupies a large and well–furnished house while Angel, in *Carpentaria*, builds her own house from discarded rubbish.

‘Masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are terms that have different and multiple meanings, some of which could reinforce limiting representations of men or women. Alice Ferrebe points out, for example, that gender is often limited to being understood as a product of home and family. For this reason, in her research on fictional representations of men, she advocates a more flexible notion of masculinity based on an ‘intense level both of emotional investment and of public performance and validation.’ 117 This definition as a means of being, feeling and desiring, as well as of being seen and assessed, provides a working definition for femininity as well as masculinity in a contemporary context; and a departure from the historical notion of the yoking of the feminine and the domestic. It does not, however, negate the validity of examining the relationship between gender and domestic space. The focus on emotion and desire allows for an examination of representations of gender that explores how both sexes interact with their primary sites of dwelling. The basis of this chapter is contained in just such an exploration because it utilises domestic space as a fixed point while attempting to construct notions of gender as they are represented in contemporary texts.

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A further issue in the examination of gender and domestic space in Australian fiction is that existing studies that have been conducted have predominantly emerged from the field of feminist scholarship as a response to a gap in scholarly attention to representations by women novelists and short story writers.\textsuperscript{118} While applauding the scholarship which has addressed the void in acknowledgement of the literary contribution of women writers, and facilitated a female voice, this chapter aims to widen the scope of attention to contemporary representations of dwelling within, and attachments to, Australian literary domestic spaces by both male and female writers about both genders. There has been some attention by scholars to considerations of domestic space and gender in Australian fiction (apart from the articles by Bird and Ferrier). Fiona Giles and Susan Martin have both considered aspects of the house as gendered space however, their scholarship concerns colonial rather than contemporary fiction.\textsuperscript{119} Giles, for example, is the editor of a collection of nineteenth century Australian women’s short stories titled \textit{From the Verandah}.\textsuperscript{120} She argues that the verandah acts as a liminal space, situated between the domestic and the public, which allowed women to ‘break down’ the gender based boundaries between both spaces.\textsuperscript{121} Similarly, Martin focuses on the area of the domestic garden in the context of colonial narratives. Tanya Dalziell, in contrast, considers contemporary representations of the verandah as a complex space attached to the notion of femininity.\textsuperscript{122} However, explorations of the

\textsuperscript{118} An example here is Drusilla Modjeska’s \textit{Exiles at Home}, Sydney: Sirius, 1981.
\textsuperscript{120} Fiona Giles. \textit{From the Verandah: Stories of Love and Landscape in Nineteenth Century Australia}.
\textsuperscript{121} Giles, p. 1
\textsuperscript{122} Tanya Dalziell. ‘Beyond the Verandah: Elizabeth Jolley’s \textit{The Orchard Thieves} and Drusilla Modjeska’s \textit{The Orchard’}, \textit{Antipodes}, vol. 11, no. 1, June 1997.
connections between gender and the fictional interior are not the main concern of these scholars.

Interestingly, verandahs are generally either unstable, absent, or not utilised by female characters in the novels that form the focus for this chapter. The gendered negotiations between spaces that are conditioned as either masculine or feminine largely take place inside the house. Oriel, in the novel *Cloudstreet* is one of the few characters who situates mediations concerning gender in a space that could be compared to a verandah in terms of its liminality when she moves into a tent in the backyard. I would argue that the general lack of use of the verandah as a space where women can transcend traditional notions of feminine space reflects a contemporary vision of the female capacity to interact more freely with the world outside the house. Male and female characters often seem to vacillate between their desires for the domestic and a sense of claustrophobia in relation to the house. While the verandah may have been a way of mediating the claustrophobia attached to the house in the past, the sense of oppression rendered by the house in the contemporary fiction of this thesis compels characters outwards so that they interact with a wider selection of minor characters. In this way the narrative is enriched.

Where current scholarly attention has focused on the house as a physical structure there have been few gendered readings. For example, Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway as editors of a collection of essays on poetics and Australian space do not consider gender at all. Rutherford looks at Bachelard’s idea of ‘the house as the producer of the subject’ but she neglects the opportunity to explore the
way in which notions of gender inform that production. This is a surprising omission in a chapter that in, many other ways, sets out to complicate Bachelard’s homogenous view of the subject in the space of the house where, as a product of his time, he tends to concentrate on males in poetic space.

The consideration of narratives that imagine changing domestic roles in contemporary Australia deserves more scholarly attention, particularly in light of the changes to understandings of gender that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the late 1960s and 1970s, as Bruce Bennett and Susan Lever have signaled, there was a ‘radical questioning’ of the ideology of nationalism in Australian literature and the notion of the ‘Australian Woman’. Furthermore, the 1970s heralded the rise of women’s liberation movements in Australia, the establishment of feminist publishing houses such as Virago and the publication of texts that focused on feminist issues such as Germaine Greer’s groundbreaking *The Female Eunuch* (1970). At a time when men were being encouraged to take on more complex domestic roles and women were urged to ‘get out of the kitchen’ and began to receive the kind of remuneration that would allow for independence, writers such as Helen Garner in *Monkey Grip* (1977), Olga Masters in *Amy’s Children* (1987) and others began to imagine narratives where gendered domestic roles were open to scrutiny. However, it appears that subsequent to the flurry of scholarly attention in the 1980s and 1990s academic focus has shifted to what

123 Rutherford. p. 115.
Rutherford sites as a response ‘in mutated form - to the spatial practices of the colonial imaginary’. These responses neglect contemporary Australian texts featuring domestic spaces and representations of the re-imagination of gender within them. An examination of gender and domestic space in contemporary Australian literature is particularly relevant in view of the way in which gender roles are portrayed in media as increasingly diverse and equally engaged in both public and private spheres. One of the questions of this chapter is whether these apparent changes in public perceptions of Australian domestic space and gender roles are more widely reflected in contemporary Australian fiction. Such exploration also has the potential to particularise the intersections and divergences of both sexes in the context of their relationships to domestic space in contemporary Australian literature.

Four main themes seem to recur within the broad range of narratives that are contained within the texts. The first theme relates to the consequences that attach to leaving the house. In almost all cases it is female characters of any race and all social circumstances who are disadvantaged or harmed by their absence from the domestic realm. The second theme is the notion of the grotesque or the masculine that attaches to female characters who leave the house. The third theme is claustrophobia and this relates to both genders of any race or degree of privilege. The fourth theme is nostalgia for the house; it is largely male characters who experience this desire. These themes will be considered in a close reading of the texts. Benang is the only text in which these themes are absent. Kathleen, for

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example, is confined to the house by Ern but she lacks the agency to even contemplate leaving. Harriette understands this when she comes to visit Kathleen and sees that she is ‘imprisoned by this tight-lipped man who stood by the door. (p. 112) Harriette has more freedom than Kathleen to be in or out of the house as she chooses but she is not rendered grotesque by leaving the house, nor is she described as feeling claustrophobic within it.

In order to both establish a sense of current evocations of gendered domestic space and explore the ways in which notions of gender might have changed over time it is advantageous to briefly contrast historical examples of Australian short stories and novels with contemporary texts. Particular historical texts have been chosen because they mirror the contemporary ones in various ways such as similar historical settings, comparable characters, social circumstances or narrative themes. For example, Ruth Park’s *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man’s Orange* have been chosen because of similarities in timeframe to *Cloudstreet* and the fact that all three texts are concerned with working–class family life. Furthermore, *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man’s Orange* feature a house that is similar to the Cloud Street home in that the space is shared by more than one family and the houses are both described as ramshackle. All three narratives concern the daily struggles of relatively poor families who live in inner suburban houses post-World War Two. Similarly, there are male protagonists who conform to one of the stereotypes of the Australian male in both the earlier and later novels. Sam Pickles and Hughie Darcy are both larrikin gamblers who have a tendency to blow the family budget. Female characters, Park’s Dolour Darcy and Winton’s Rose Pickles also face similar dilemmas concerning health and poverty as they approach adulthood. Both young
women express a longing for escape. Park’s Dolour and Winton’s Rose dream of leaving the unwelcome burdens of family life and travelling out to the world but are blocked to some extent by their gender. Both Dolour and Rose have mothers who increasingly seem unable to take the full responsibility for the family’s domestic life. Dolour, for example, is constrained by the necessity to take on an increasing load of domestic duties. Similarly, Rose takes on many of the household tasks that her mother neglects. The world outside the domestic realm is filled with mysteries and, at times, unsettlement that seems specific to their gender such as humiliation by boyfriends whom they accompany to parties. Eventually, both Dolour and Rose take on roles in the domestic sphere rather than the roles in the public sphere they envisaged.

The three novels, *The Harp in the South*, *Poor Man’s Orange* and *Cloudstreet* are set apart by their publication dates. Park’s novels were first published in the 1940s while *Cloudstreet* was first published approximately fifty years later. Dolour’s circumstances are somewhat different to those of Rose as class plays a factor in her inability to leave Surry Hills. In order to leave that space Dolour would require a well-paid position outside the area. As one of Hughie’s drinking mates argues, ‘Nobody out of Surro ever gets a posh job.’¹²⁸ Dolour comes to view herself as destined for the ‘poor man’s orange’ of marriage to her sister’s widower while Rose states that she is diminished by the outside world. Both women accept their reduced dreams on the basis that love makes it all worthwhile. For Park’s Dolour this love is sexual in nature, whereas in the case of Winton’s Rose, as well as her desire for Quick, this turning away from a previous dream is couched in terms of the

¹²⁸ Park. *Poor Man’s Orange*, p. 99
consolation provided by the love of her extended family. However, there are crucial differences between the earlier and later novels that seem to encapsulate the shifts in representations of gender in contemporary Australian fiction. Firstly, men in *Cloudstreet* interpret their masculinity in more diverse ways, which include nurturing, and taking on other domestic tasks such as cooking. Sam Pickles, for example, takes on much of the nurturing role, in relation to Rose, that Dolly is incapable of fulfilling. Secondly, a new space has opened up for women and this is represented by Oriel. She relieves the tensions of being female, negotiating a public life and occupying domestic space through her role as a shopkeeper in a space attached to the house.

Ruth Park’s *Harp In The South* and *Poor Man’s Orange* provide good examples of the representation of the perceived or actual danger of women’s access to the public domain. For example, the elder daughter Roie is physically set upon by drunken sailors in a public space and consequently aborts her baby in *The Harp In The South* while the younger daughter, Dolour, in the sequel, *Poor Man’s Orange*, is set upon by partygoers when she attends a party with her friend Harry.129 I would argue further that public space is often difficult to survive in for many of the female characters in contemporary texts. Mandy, the daughter of Margaret enters the public sphere through her occupation as a war correspondent however, the outside world damages her, affecting her ability to recognise common objects as benign. She also becomes the obsession of a male character who eventually comes to the hospital where Mandy and her family are maintaining a vigil at the bedside of their father and threatens them with a gun. Similarly, in *The Great World* Jenny Keen’s

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129 Park. *The Harp in the South*, p.140-141, Park, *Poor Man’s Orange* p. 189
attempts to leave the confines of the Keen home result in danger in the public sphere. After becoming pregnant, she is institutionalised until she is rescued by Digger. Following her disastrous attempts to leave home, Jenny contents herself with life in the house at Keen’s Crossing, feeling that, in contrast to Digger, the outside world renders her powerless. (p. 68) Jenny’s powerlessness is partially explained by her intellectual disability however, the dangers she faces outside the safety of the Keen home are based on her gender and this is exemplified when she becomes a victim of a sexual assault while in the city. (p. 66) Rose Pickles is psychically damaged by public space and eventually retires to the domestic world where her mental health is assured. Rose, as a young girl, is similar to Jenny, Mandy, Margaret, and many other female characters in Australian fiction in her desire to experience the ‘great world’. Rose’s first lover, reporter Toby Raven, represents all that she aspires to. He is worldly in the face of her domestic naivety. ‘Rose thought of morgues, cells, the steps of aeroplanes, the flash of camera bulbs. Her world was mundane and domestic in the high times.’ (p. 289) Initially, Rose’s venture into public space through her position at Bairds Department Store invigorates her. ‘The moment she left the yard at Cloudstreet the wide world fell wonderfully upon Rose.’ (p. 291) Despite this positive experience of the possibilities of the great world her dreams quickly become surprisingly domestic. ‘On the pillow beside Toby, she even imagined herself married with children, with a house in the new clean suburbs and all of Toby’s clever friends around to make her laugh.’ (p. 291)

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130 Dolour in *Poor Man’s Orange*, Sybil in *My Brilliant Career*, Mandy in *The Children*. 
Part of that dream is related to escaping the confines of her status as a working class woman. Rose eventually finds that the world outside the Cloud Street home diminishes her and she returns to the house as her principal space.

In historical Australian fiction many settler short stories feature characters who have established new territories. These settler narratives are similar to the contemporary novels, *Cloudstreet* and *The Great World* in that both these texts concern the settlement of new spaces. The short stories of Henry Lawson, ‘The Loaded Dog’ and ‘The Union Buries its Dead’, present male dominated public spheres. Female characters, meanwhile, deal with events on the home front in the absence of male partners. An example here is the young mother in Barbara Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ who occupies the family slab hut while her spouse is working away for long periods of time. Similarly, Mrs. Spicer in Lawson’s ‘Water them Geraniums’ and the Drover’s wife in the short story of the same name contend with the lengthy absences of men in their rural family abodes. In *The Great World*, Digger’s mother also feels abandoned by her husband when he joins the army. *Cloudstreet*, however, represents a new narrative of settlement when it features men engaged in the process of domestic settlement alongside their female partners. The settlement in *Cloudstreet* relates to the house itself and I would argue that this is because the house represents nation in the novel.

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Another older novel that is also worth considering is Kylie Tennant’s *The Battlers*. The family dynamic of Snow, the male protagonist in Kylie Tennant’s novel is a particular example of this separation of the sexes whereby women and children occupy an area circumscribed by the notion of domesticity and men maintain an infrequent association with the house.133 Snow, for instance, ponders the idea of going home after nine months absence.

But Snow was not any too eager to reach home. His return was never the scene of wild enthusiasm. One of his sons might stroll inside and announce: ‘Hey, Mum, Dad’s here.’ And his wife would remark grimly: ‘Hello! So you’re back, are you?’ (p. 1)

Snow and his family demonstrate an equivocal acceptance of his relationship to the house in terms of presence or absence from it. Snow’s attitude towards the house as a space in his life has its parallel in that of members of the Keen family in *The Great World* (other than Digger) and in the men of the Phantom family in *Carpentaria* who have little attachment to domestic space until the end of the narrative.

Historically, female characters in Australian fiction resist the ‘comforts’ of the house and describe a sense of confinement, if not claustrophobia, that compels them to abandon it or, at least, to imagine doing so. Marjorie Barnard’s artfully understated short story ‘The Lottery’ is an example here.134 Barnard’s portrayal of a man imagining how he might manage the financial windfall from his wife’s unexpected lottery win concludes with his spouse’s announcement that she is leaving the marriage and the home. Often however, there is a return to the house

either willingly or because no other choice exists. This is the case for Oriel who returns to the house once she feels welcomed by it. It is also the case for Dolly who eventually seems resigned to a domestic role as a grandmother. The same return to the house is seen in the character, Erika, in *The Memory Room* who longs for marriage and the domestic even as she takes on a high profile public life. This longing is symbolised by the home she sets up in Canberra with its pristine kitchen that she proudly show Vincent.

Bennett and Strauss have noted that Australian fiction has been deeply affected by historically significant events such as European settlement and the First and Second World Wars. These significant events are at the core of national stereotypes such as the ‘Anzac Legend’ and the ‘bush’ myth. In Australian fiction the relationship of gender to the domestic sphere is influenced by such historically significant tropes. These narratives endorse Marilyn Lake’s argument that domesticity, femininity and domestic space were envisaged as counter to Australian masculinity and its association with freedom and independence. Historically, women are imagined as the sex that most consistently occupies domestic space and this is also reflected in Australian fiction up until the last few decades of the twentieth century. In the past, Australian fictional female characters seemed to fit into two broad categories in their relationships to domestic space. In the first category, the domestic sphere circumscribed women and in the second category, women are represented in the public sphere, but that space presented particular challenges and

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dangers for them as a sex. It is often the case, as Bird argues, that it is very difficult for female characters to leave the domestic sphere in order to attain the perceived gains of access to the public sphere.\footnote{Delys Bird. p. 43.} Examples include Christina Stead’s \textit{For Love Alone}, where women who enjoy freedom of access to public space alongside men are labelled ‘wild’.\footnote{Christina Stead. (1945), \textit{For Love Alone}, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973, p. 21.} Similarly, in Dorothy Hewett’s \textit{Bobbin’ Up} the circumscription of the central character’s public life concerns the care of her children, which is largely seen as her sole responsibility.\footnote{Dorothy Hewett. (1959), \textit{Bobbin’ Up}, London: Virago, 1985.} Traditionally, female characters remain in the house even as they feel confined by it. The character of Sybylla in \textit{My Brilliant Career} typifies this notion of the women and the house when she expresses her feeling that her career ultimately has no other probable direction than the domestic and likens her fate to having cancer.\footnote{Miles Franklin. (1901), \textit{My Brilliant Career/My Career goes Bung}, Pymble: Harper Perennial, 2004, p. 252.} Sybylla is unable to create another life for herself that would be radically different from that which she internally rejects. This representation of women and the difficulties of accessing the public realm is also found in the work of Marion Halligan and Olga Masters. For example, the protagonist, Angela, in Halligan’s \textit{Self Possession} (1987) faces the curtailment of her academic career because of an unexpected pregnancy. Angela’s ability to obtain the abortion that allows her to continue her scholarly pursuits is a matter of luck and the generosity of others rather than the result of her own agency. Similarly, in Olga Master’s \textit{Amy’s Children}, Amy’s financial security and personal freedom are afforded to her because she leaves her children in the care of her parents and denies their existence in her applications for paid work. Her
efforts to maintain the freedoms she values are threatened by the reappearance of the children.\textsuperscript{142}

In the texts of this thesis female characters want to escape the house for much the same reason as men however they are more often restricted by the burden of expectations in relation to the feminine role in the house that comes from both men and women and is often internalised. For Margaret, the mother figure in \textit{The Children}, an acceptance of the domestic as her main realm occurs after the birth of her first child. There is a level of acquiescence at play in her character that is additional to the opposition she faces from her mother. Margaret regrets the lack of opportunity to have what she imagined as a dynamic career as a flight attendant. Her mother concealed Margaret’s letter of acceptance from an airline company when she was young and this acted as a catalyst for her to abandon her ambition and occupy the domestic sphere as a kind of second prize. Margaret reflects upon her life as a married woman whose daily life was encompassed and defined by the domestic. The domestic routine is ‘exhausting’ (p. 16) and boring. It is also a sphere that Margaret feels could have been transformed into a ‘glazed, pretty world’ if she had accepted her doctor’s offer of a prescription for Valium. (p. 20) Margaret’s lack of agency in pursuing her desire is tied to her acceptance that her role in the public sphere is limited because she is female. This is encapsulated in the scene where she recalls being in a hospital for the delivery of her first baby. She experiences ‘the hurtling shock and hatred’ that accompanied her realisation that her mother had sabotaged her attempt to become an airhostess when her father

mentions that he found the mouldy letter poked into the hedge when he was clipping it. (p. 17)

In *Cloudstreet*, Dolly Pickles seems to lack agency in deciding her future. She longs to travel as a young woman, but she appears stymied by her sexuality.

She just got to be goodlooking and cheeky and by sixteen she found herself out on her back under the night sky with a long procession of big hatted men, one of whom, the youngest, the fairest of them, was sleeping up there in that saggy great house with his arms up behind his head, and his fingerless fist on her pillow. (p. 79)

The tone of this passage, particularly, the phrase ‘found herself’ suggests that Dolly did not have a great deal of choice in the matter of her future. Oriel is similar to Dolly in terms of thwarted dreams. She relates the story of her desire, in her youth, to become a teacher. Her plans are cast aside when her father’s remarriage creates a ‘whole squad of babies’. (p. 71) Oriel is unable to complete her education because she is delegated the role of carer for the children. She suffers the added pain of seeing her stepmother take on a career as a teacher at the bush school. ‘*She* taught at the bush school. She wasn’t much older than me, you know. And I wanted to be a teacher, but I never finished school. I raised her family. (p. 71) For women such as Oriel the option of a public life is made possible through her management of the shop attached to the house. Jenny in *The Great World* and Ma Warrender both occupy similar spaces but in each case that public life is conducted close to the house.

Jenny Keen’s adventure into the Great World has proved unsafe and she returns to the house to ‘mind’ the shop attached to the house. For Jenny, the world outside of
her domestic sphere is presented as dangerous (even as a child) and causes her trauma.

It wasn’t the fear of being alone out there that took her back each time. It was all the hands, even in a crowd of strangers, that kept reaching out to grab or squeeze or pinch or turn themselves into fists and go smash at you. (p. 67)

Jenny understands that her capacity to tolerate the great world, ‘the terror of what was possible out there, the cruelty of some people’ (p. 67) is far less than that of her brother, Digger. ‘He’d never come up against whatever it was, out there, that could utterly flatten him.’ (p. 68) She contents herself with a domestic life circumscribed by the house and shop at Keen’s Crossing. Jenny remains wary and uncertain of people, but certain of her scones. ‘That was more like it. Scones. Scones were her long suit.’ (p. 4) The motif of being ‘flattened’ by the world outside the domestic one is repeated in the narratives of Rose and Dolly in *Cloudstreet* and Mandy in *The Children*. It is also evidenced, for example, in other female characters in contemporary Australian narratives such as Joan London’s *The Good Parents* where Mia and her mother are both subdued by treacherous men in the public sphere.  

Dolly Pickles is damaged when she interacts with the public sphere. There is a clear sense within the narrative that her escapes from the house are detrimental to her. The narrative describes the leathering of Dolly’s skin, her gradual degradation and exposure to being used and abused. Eventually, Dolly is hospitalised after going missing for three days. Oriel seems to contend with public space without incident; however, even here her departure from the house sees her in peril at one point in the narrative. She narrowly escapes the attentions of the Nedlands Monster who stalks the backyard near the tent she has set up when she abandoned the house. Angel Day in *Carpentaria* faces danger even when she is in

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the house with Bruiser and Truthful destroying her home, but she is at her most vulnerable when she leaves the house to travel to the city. She is raped by a truck driver she catches a lift with and then drifts alone in the city, living in an abandoned building. Kathleen in *Benang* is raped by a policeman and then goes missing when she breaks her curfew to collect water at night.

The man wore a uniform like Sergeant Hall had, and if he even looked like Sergeant Hall, this man leading you into a cell, unbuckling his belt? Well, maybe that was the way it had to be for us, the same thing happening over and over again. Kathleen had kept to herself so much that it was days before it was confirmed that she was missing. (p. 139)

Male characters, on the whole, are not subject to the same dangers as women in the public sphere (unless they join the army). Quick Lamb in *Cloudstreet*, is the exception. He takes up a job as a ‘roo shooter’ in a rural area in order to escape the melancholy that envelops him in the space of the haunted Cloud Street house.

Maybe if he could get out into the paddocks more, out where the air is stronger than memory so he could at least sometimes get shot of that terrible noiseless moment when he is walking along and Fish is just gone. (p.60)

In some ways, the character of Quick is like those of the female characters of other texts under consideration in this chapter because leaving the house is detrimental to him. He is attacked by a large kangaroo and would have died without the chance passing by of a farmer. In the aftermath of this event, Quick begins to imagine a figure running naked through the wheat at times when he is about to shoot what initially seems to be a kangaroo.

In comes the first silhouette, a leader, so far out in front of the rest that there’s no sign of the mob behind, and when it cracks from the dry, heady, mass of wheat Quick hits the spot to get a look at the monster. But it’s human, a man running raw and shirtless in the light. (p. 204)

The narrative suggests that Quick is running from himself. This ongoing hallucination renders Quick unsuitable for the job as a kangaroo shooter and
precipitates his journey back to face the demons he has originally associated with the house in Cloud Street which include his guilt about his brother Fish’s accident. Prior to his return home, however, Quick recuperates at his employer’s home. He is used by Wentworth’s daughter, Lucy, who sees him as a means of escaping the claustrophobia of her rural environment. She is hoping to start a business as a florist in the city using the scandal of having sex with Quick as a bargaining tool to obtain funds from her father. The Cloud Street house now shelters Quick and affords him a sense of belonging. He is able to travel out to his new job as a police officer each day knowing he will return to the sanctuary of family and home contained in the rickety old house. ‘After he got back with his family, he found that Cloudstreet had a hold on him’. (p. 299) It seems that the rigours of public space enhance Quick’s sense of desire for the house in much the same way as the experience of war endears Digger and Vic to domestic spaces.

The representation of a male character as a vulnerable and sensitive person is a recurrent theme in Winton’s narratives. The juxtaposition of strong women and vulnerable men is repeated in many of his works. Quick’s sensitivity and the difficulties he faces in the public sphere are representative of Winton’s attempts to deconstruct the Australian stereotype of males as active, women as passive, men favouring reason and women acting according to emotion. This deconstruction of gender stereotypes plays out in the juxtaposition of male and female characters with interior spaces such as the house as well as more public spaces such as the Cloud Street shop. Winton, in response to a question by Elizabeth Guy about differences

between his depictions of men as opposed to other contemporary Australian writers, argues:

[O]thers have written about men in a traditional way and I guess I’m writing about it from an orthodox female point of view. My father cooked and cleaned and did the washing and put on his copper’s uniform and went to work. I just thought it was normal.\(^\text{145}\)

Winton’s remark that he sees his characterisations as somewhat unique in terms of representations of male (and female) characters invites further scrutiny. A few contemporary Australian novels do depict male characters as having a role in the domestic world and this is portrayed as a natural phenomenon. An example is the character of Stephen who takes on a nurturing role in relation to his girlfriend’s children in Charlotte Wood’s *Animal People*. Many more novels, such as Sarah Hopkins’ *Speak To Me* and Christos Tsiolkas’ *The Slap* feature female characters involved in the public sphere. Winton’s male characters are essentially traditional. What places them apart is their strong connection to the house particularly as the novel is set in a period when men were not seen as connected to the domestic. For example, domestic activities that would normally be imagined as feminine at that time in Australia are afforded to the character Quick who occupies a central role in caring for his brother Fish as well as Quick’s young son Harry. Similarly, Fish’s father, Lester Lamb, bakes the cakes for the shop while Oriel, his wife, visibly and publically takes on the managerial role.

One male character in *Cloudstreet* who stands outside the house is the Aboriginal man who briefly enters the narrative on a few occasions. He is depicted as a somewhat mystical character who senses the unease that is contained within the

Cloud Street house due to its having housed Aboriginal girls who were treated poorly. He is physically repelled by the house:

He moved back carefully, as if moving back in his own footsteps, his eyes roving about all the time from wall to ceiling to floor, and as soon as he was over the threshold he turned and ran. (p. 62)

His unease about the house is connected to his ability to detect the house’s haunting, just as Fish, Oriel and Lester do, rather than because of his gender. Unlike most male characters in Cloudstreet, the Aboriginal character is never depicted as having a positive connection to any house or shelter. When Quick asks him ‘Where you from, mate?’ he replies ‘Aw, all over.’ (p. 208) I would argue that this relates to his depiction as a mystical character (he shares seemingly inexhaustible wine and bread with Quick) rather than because of his gender.

In the contemporary setting of The Children negotiation of the public sphere for two of the main characters, Mandy, and her mother, Margaret is complicated. Mandy works as a war correspondent and the time she spends in her own domestic space is limited whereas Margaret has stayed at home working to bring up her three children and looking after the domestic needs of the family. Both women are represented as having been constrained in quite different ways by their choices or, conversely, lack of agency in terms of careers. Mandy has pursued a career as far from the domestic realm as possible and Margaret understands this as Mandy’s choice of ‘a life in which her mother can’t come after her.’ (p. 17) Presumably, the danger was that Margaret might have dragged Mandy back in to the domestic realm if she had been able to spend time with her more readily. There is an implication that daughters need to evade the influence of their mothers. This is best
accomplished by travelling out into public spaces that are deemed unattainable for mothers who inhabit the domestic sphere. However, Mandy has been psychologically damaged by her choice of career in a confronting public sphere. Her occupation has rendered domestic space uncanny for her.

She is staring at the bedside table when beneath a saucer holding hairpins and a tube of hand cream she sees a red, sticky pool. Her heart bolts – once-twice-until she makes out the glistening splotch as a wide, beaded red bracelet. (p. 35)

Many of these disturbing scenes have links to the domestic sphere such as the shooting of a young Palestinian girl.

On the television screen a Palestinian boy is crawling, dragging himself across the flat concrete roof of his apartment block. He is demonstrating for the reporter how he dragged his dead sister, who was shot while hanging laundry, across the roof.’ (p. 107)

Salvation for Mandy lies in concentrating on being a witness to the domestic. She vows to watch over the ‘ordinary decencies’ such as the sound of the dishes being washed. (p. 266) Mandy’s final solution to trauma is similar to that of Digger in The Great World. After witnessing the brutality of an internment camp in the Second World War it is the simplicity of the domestic, the thickness of cups and saucers that comfort him. The domestic acts as a balm to (normally male) travelers outside the space of the home. This is also the case for Vic who enjoys the peacefulness of the kitchen in the early morning after his return from Changi. These portrayals of the elevation of the domestic realm to something approaching reverence are not new ways of seeing domestic space. They are common in contemporary television advertisements but I would suggest that they are infrequent in contemporary Australian fiction where the domestic is often ignored.
In the novel *Carpentaria*, the character of Angel Day has some similarities to Mandy and Margaret, in *The Children*. Entering public space is as fraught as it is for Mandy and Angel is actively encouraged by other women to remain within the house she has built for herself. There still exists an expectation from older Aboriginal women in Desperance that the domestic sphere is the most suitable place for younger women such as Angel and her friends and this is expressed in the off-the-cuff yet potent critique, ‘Haven’t you got a kitchen to attend to instead of sitting around ponging like backstreet alley cats?’ (p. 137-138) This comment, while inferring that Angel is not in her home much, contradicts Angel’s actions. She is most often in the house or else gathering domestic objects for it. Angel differs from the other women however, in the way that she does not seem to feel stifled in her own home. Unlike Mandy, Margaret, Rose Pickles and Jenny Keen she expresses no desire to travel out to ‘the great world’ until the climax of the novel when she travels to the city. One of the main reasons why Angel might prefer the domestic realm is related to her race as well as her gender. She is, like many of the other Aboriginal women in Desperance, subject to the possibility of rape when she enters public space. The Mayor, Bruiser, for example, is able to boast publically and with impunity about the time he chased Angel ‘down to the creek until her bony legs gave up.’ (p. 41) The rape of Aboriginal women by public officials is a theme repeated in minor narratives throughout *Carpentaria*.\(^\text{146}\) Angel enjoys relative safety inside her house despite the fact that Bruiser and Truthful eventually wreck her second house. It is the act of leaving Desperance and moving away from her local area that proves most harmful to Angel.

\(^{146}\) For example, the story of police officers teaching young Indigenous girls ‘a lesson’ by raping them is described as an almost incidental story. p. 450.
She disappeared into another world as simply as looking through a hollow log and having no idea where the porcupine went after just having seen him run through it. Poof! It was unbelievable that a living creature could just disappear into thin air. In the end Angel was lost. Lost on the road to nowhere. (p. 454)

It seems as though the loss of her identity as a member of the community of Pricklebush through the act of going in to public space is the key to her being physically lost. The narrative works to reinforce the idea of the importance of both community and country.

Rose Pickles in *Cloudstreet* is also lost when she tries to exercise her independence by separating herself from her family, working and socialising in the public realm but she is not subject to external dangers like Angel, Mandy and Jenny. Instead, it is her mental wellbeing that is compromised by her interaction in the public sphere. Rose stops eating and rapidly loses weight. She speaks about her experience as an independent woman working as a telephonist and socialising in the outer world. ‘When I want to be independent I retire. I go skinny and puke. You’ve seen me like that. I just begin to disappear.’ (p. 419) It seems as though many female characters in the contemporary fiction of this thesis are portrayed as having similar difficulties negotiating public space to those in earlier works of fiction. Of course, these difficulties advance the plot but the fact that they are largely resolved when the characters return to the house speaks to the implicit value placed on the domestic in the narratives. Fanny Benang is the opposite of these women. She is able to survive in both public and domestic spaces. This is not because she faces no danger in public space. She faces the possibility of being taken to a reserve and is branded as a prostitute by local authorities. Her ingenuity is what keeps her safe outside the house. This creates a character that contrasts with almost all other Indigenous
characters in the novel. Fanny is an ideal in the novel. Her character acts as the embodiment of the idea of survival.

Ma Warrender and her daughter Ellie in *The Great World* are similar to Fanny Benang in that the public sphere does not harm them. Both characters credit the Second World War with opening up opportunities for women in the public sphere. However, in Ma Warrender’s case her involvement is not curtailed at the conclusion of the war. She describes herself as helping out her husband to give him time to write his book. Those around her recognise that her role is much more substantial than this but play along with the fiction as a kind of protection of her husband’s dignity. Ma Warrender is similar to Oriel Lamb in the way in which she negotiates her position in public space. Her role in managing the soap factory alongside her son-in-law Vic is one in which she feels in place. ‘But it had changed Ma utterly, this move to the centre of their lives. All that had previously been lax in her had come to attention’. (p. 215) Nevertheless, her role in business is conducted within the confines of the house. Ma Warrender is portrayed as somewhat superfluous to the housekeeper Meggsie in her role as manager of the house. She is also unfulfilled by, and clumsy in, her execution of household tasks. Unlike any other novel mentioned in this chapter Malouf’s representation of Ma Warrender allows for this feminine domestic inadequacy. His portrayal of Ma as a woman whose unique talents lay outside the sphere of the domestic disavows the notion that domestic competency is innate. In a similar way, Malouf allows the character of Mr. Warrender to be incompetent in the role of manager of the soap factory but well suited to the job of writing a book, which takes place largely within the domestic space of the house.
In relation to the feminine abandonment of the colonial domestic sphere it is far more common that departure from the house creates a female character who struggles with her identity once any possibility of a house-bound persona is gone. The woman who leaves the domestic realm is often rendered, in some way either masculine and/or grotesque. Australian fictional women who leave the space of the house and travel out into the world have frequently been described in masculine terms. This is the case in Baynton’s short story ‘Squeaker’s Mate’. Squeaker’s mate is a tall, stoic woman who ‘was the best long-haired mate that ever stepped out in petticoats’. Baynton’s character is broadly representative of the trope of the colonial Australian feminine where, according to Tanya Dalziell, young women ‘entertained a healthy resistance to Victorian prescriptions for white feminine propriety’. However, Dalziell points to a level of colonial anxiety in Australian fiction associated with the instability of this trope of propriety. Even to imagine a life that encompassed something other than the domestic was to provoke danger. I would argue that, historically, a contradiction has existed in Australian literature where on the one hand, eschewing the Victorian prescription of domesticity is frequently lauded in a female character, yet often also leads to the creation of an uncanny figure. Baynton’s female mate becomes a grotesque figure when her back is broken by a falling tree. Similarly, the Stray, in The Battlers, a female character who travels on the road with Snow, is described in grotesque terms as ‘something the darkness had spewed forth in disgust.’ (p. 4)

147 Barbara Baynton. The Portable Barbara Baynton, (eds.) S. Krimmer and A. Lawson, University of Queensland Press; St Lucia, 1980, p. 11.
The character Mandy, in *The Children*, is also portrayed as both somewhat masculine and grotesque. Her position as a war correspondent places her in a space that is dominated by males. It necessitates a particular attitude that is described as ‘scary’. (p. 217) She finds it necessary to adopt this persona to survive in a male-dominated public space. Mandy’s husband, Chris, interprets his wife’s occupation and her fierceness as a failure of their marriage. He is humiliated that ‘his wife would go to a war rather than stay home with him.’ (p. 155) There appears to be no middle ground for Mandy to occupy. She must either be a war correspondent or a wife. This is related to the demands of her occupation and it becomes increasingly difficult for her to adjust to the role of spouse when she returns from overseas.

Mandy’s memories of the traumas she has witnessed as a journalist in war-torn Afghanistan, in particular the fatal wounding of a young boy, become entwined with images of quotidian domestic objects and unsettle her within the domestic space of her childhood home. She comes to see herself in a grotesque way as a ‘trapped long-ago bird, wedged rotting between its river rocks, … stained with decay from too much death, from too much misery too closely watched’. (p. 266)

*Cloudstreet* offers two opposite views of ‘mother’. One is severe and busy while the other is languid and promiscuous. Yet, both are described as hard and tough. Oriel is described in terms of war. ‘She’s got an army behind her.’ (p. 155) Oriel states that Dolly is as ‘hard as lard’. (p. 64) This is also an idea that Oriel attaches to herself with her own descriptions of being ‘hard as nails’. (p. 64) These descriptions counter the notion of ‘mother’ as soft and nurturing, a role adopted by Rose after the birth of Harry. The portrayal of Oriel as a masculine character and the partial loss of her maternal qualities represented by the inability of Fish to
recognise her as his mother following his accident, creates a seemingly irresolvable tension in the narrative. However, this gender-based tension is resolved by placing her outside the house. Both women defy the maternal stereotype in that Oriel distances herself from the family in a geographical sense and Dolly refuses to mother Rose. Winton articulates their non-compliance with the conventional domestic role of mothering by describing them in terms of extremes and situate them away from the domestic routines of the house. For Oriel, the loss of her role as mother to Fish compels her to leave the house as if mothers are inside and non-mothers are outside domestic space. This notion that some perceived lack in terms of mothering might relate to the right to occupy the domestic realm is repeated in the figure of Dolly. Although she never abandons the house in the same way as Oriel she does ‘escape’ regularly. Similarly to Oriel, there is a suggestion that Dolly’s lack of mothering is connected to her absences from the house. Once again there is the implication that the house is the space of mothers and that non-mothers are set outside this space. Dolly becomes somewhat grotesque over time and this is linked in the narrative to her absences from the house. At one stage she is found by Rose in a bar being abused by some men.

[S]he herself was lying on the bar with men leaning on her and their drinks on coasters balanced on her belly, between her breasts, along her thighs. They were squeezing her for it, those men, milking her tits for beer, foaming up their glasses, reaching inside her camisole, forcing her legs apart to get at things and dragging out coins, furniture, dead babies and old bottles. (p. 351)

She is described in the narrative as ‘more haglike than any pantomime witch’ and Rose wonders how something like Dolly could give birth to her. (p. 352)

Quick is the only male character who becomes grotesque when he interacts with the public sphere. He is returned to his family, mysteriously ill and glowing like a light-
bulb after he leaves Cloudstreet to take up a position as a roo shooter and ends up staying at his father’s cousin’s farm: ‘When they loaded the boy into the cab he lit up the dash and sent the swine into a shitting frenzy.’ (p. 220) His portrayal as grotesque as a result of his interaction with public space in this part of the narrative is connected to Winton’s attempts to create complex male characters who defy the stereotype of the stoic.

Elizabeth Ferrier considers the idea of abandoning the house in fiction when she argues that both men and women are represented in Australian fiction as fleeing the confines of the house.149 The house as a claustrophobic entity is well established in most of the novels in this study. It is also experienced by both genders of various social privilege and race. Sometimes characters long for escape from the house at the same time as they dream of the domestic. This is the case for Rose, who dreams of escape from the domestic world of Cloud Street at the same time as she daydreams about a domestic life with Toby McGuire. It is also the case for Erika whose need for the peace that she feels a domestic life with Derek would afford her and need for the excitement of public life are simultaneous. Erika seems to want a domestic life with Derek at one point. She states that she will marry him and is willing to ‘go with him to wherever he was posted.’ (p. 235) She also daydreams that once they are married she will ‘walk in the Vienna woods or sit and sketch by the Danube.’ (p. 238) However, she shies away from that vision quite quickly. She states that she is not going to give up being a journalist. It seems as though the idea of being out of the public sphere is a romantic notion rather than a desire. These

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149 Ferrier, p. 40-53
conflicting dreams and desires encapsulate Erika’s ungrounded personality which eventually leads to her suicide.

*The Great World* also has characters who flee the house. The claustrophobia experienced by the male Keen family members, Digger and his father, is attached to the expectations of the mother figure, Marge, in relation to domestic responsibilities. For instance, Marge’s husband feels too young to take on domestic responsibilities.

He was too young, he felt, for the responsibilities that were put upon him by a household that had arrived from nowhere, had simply crept up on him (that’s how he saw it) while he was dreaming at the wheel. (p.13)

His attitude to domesticity and his responsibilities as a parent provides a clear example of the representation of masculinity that Lake has spoken of where domesticity is seen in as limiting masculine freedom.

The house at Keen’s Crossing also stifles Digger, as he is growing up, because it contains the ghosts of the siblings who did not live past infancy. Digger feels weighed down by the desire, placed on him by his mother, that he remain with her in the absence of those dead children. A claustrophobic atmosphere is created within the Keen house by Marge’s mourning, in particular, for Digger and Jenny’s older brother Billy, who died after wandering off from the house.

These deaths made the house more crowded than it might otherwise have been, but also emptier, exerting a pressure all round that forced him and Jenny, who, as his mother told him over and over had only one another, into a space that was too narrow and which he felt at times was another sort of coffin. (p. 30)

For Digger and his father there is a preoccupation with leaving the house at Keen’s Crossing with all its associated domestic expectations and attempts to create a
tightly bound family. It is the driving force of much of the novel as it compels both characters out of the house and precipitates their desire for the great world. This idea of going to war, which constitutes a kind of national act of heroism, is only available to the men in *The Great World* much as it was largely confined to men in the national narrative of the Anzacs. The Anzac myth, which Bruce Bennett describes as, ‘Australia’s twentieth century ‘foundation myth’ has been powerfully presented as the story of Gallipoli – a story that describes heroism achieved in defeat’. The young Australian male leaving home is a vital act in the Anzac narrative but it is carried through to the Second World War. The representation of peculiarly Australian narratives seems to be part of Malouf’s intention in this novel. Digger’s mother also experiences claustrophobia, within the domestic sphere, towards the end of her life. Her dreams of having a complete family bound by the house have failed to materialise. The house has disappointed her. She climbs to the top of a nearby hill in order to see what it is she has not been a part of for over thirty years: ‘Only up here was new to her. And why had she left it thirty-three years to come up here and see it?’ (p. 245) At this point she completely rejects the house as she feels she has failed to create a ‘home’ to which close family is intrinsic. Her final act of burning the domestic possessions she has collected over many years and her refusal to re-enter the house symbolises her recognition that the plan to make the Keen male family members accept the idea of the house and family as the centre of their lives has failed. Her claustrophobia is encapsulated in the sentence ‘[S]uddenly, just this afternoon, she couldn’t bear to be in the house any longer, in the stuffy little back bedroom, on a day when the wind was up.’ (p. 244) Marge senses that the home she has worked to establish has, in fact, reduced

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150 Bennett. *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood*, p. 15
her. Her final conversation with her son Digger reveals the despair she feels at the
domestic life she has lived. ‘The things she told him were terrible. He had not
known she was in such despair.’ (p. 246)

[T]heir mother continued to sit with her back to the house. It was ashes in her
head. The house, the store and all its contents. She had put a match to them,
whether or not the flame had taken. (p. 246)

Her refusal to go back inside and her death is a final escape from the house. Marge
acts as a foil to Digger in the narrative. He has longed for escape from the house
just as she has spent her time willingly encapsulated by it. Her final abandonment
of the house runs counter to Digger’s newfound reverence for the domestic.

Both male and female characters in the novel *Cloudstreet* experience a sense of
claustrophobia that is similar in some ways to that of characters in *The Great
World*. The narrative suggests that the house itself, despite its large size, creates this
feeling amongst various members of the two families, Pickles and Lambs, who
occupy it. At one point in the narrative, for example, it seems as though the house
itself is encouraging Oriel to leave it. Similarly, Quick Lamb abandons the house in
a hurried flight that knocks Rose to the ground. Lester Lamb also experiences a
sense of claustrophobia in relation to the house when he declares that, ‘Even when
it’s empty it feels overcrowded’. (p. 237) Although it is not as obviously described
in *Cloudstreet* Dolly, the mother in the Pickles family, is also subject to a sense of
claustrophobia within the domestic confines of the house. She refers, for example,
to the noise of the busy Lamb family that echoes through the house, ‘until the
vibrations in the walls next door drove her from the house’. (p. 152) However, it is
more than noise that drives Dolly from the house. Her real motivation for leaving is
the level of restlessness she feels. The domestic realm lacks the excitement,
fulfilment and recognition that Dolly craves. She notes wistfully that, ‘All night, all
day, people seem to be going someplace else.’ (p. 42) Her solution is to trade on her
sexuality to create a more vibrant life outside the confinement and isolation of the
house. Her desire to escape drives her down to the train tracks at night and into the
embrace of various men. However, she never escapes the house for more than a few
nights.

In *Carpentaria*, Normal Phantom is also subject to feelings of claustrophobia in
relation to the house. On each occasion that he leaves the house he feels as though
he has ‘unshackled himself from the weight of a sack strapped over his back.’ (p.
13) The narrative, initially, indicates that Normal’s discontent has a specifically
cultural determination due to the position of the house on top of a snake’s pit but
his character suggests that any house would be claustrophobic for him. Normal is
more comfortable in external space. ‘Normal was still a young man who either
wanted to be out at sea fishing, or else riding wild horses on the spinifex-covered
high plains, working with the cattle.’ (p. 15) Normal’s response to Angel’s distress
that he is not willing to spend time in the house she has built is to leave her and
their children. He is absent for a period of five years. ‘Normal was like ebbing
water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea. He
stayed away on the water as long as he pleased.’ (p. 6) However, he still feels free
to work on his occupation as a fish taxidermist in a space at the rear of the house.
Margaret also experiences a sense of claustrophobia in relation to her domestic life.
It is symbolised for her in the art installation she visits with her daughter Cathy, a
long tunnel with walls that press in on her.
The white breathing corridor was a missed life, and you clinging to a tiny, hungry baby for protection, and being shown your other future, pushed deep into the dark of the hedge, speckled with bird dirt and mildew. (p. 17-18)

Margaret’s sense of claustrophobia is tied to a belief that the opportunity of another life was closed to her and her life confined to the domestic is stifling. Erika in The Memory Room is similar to Margaret in some ways. She does not refer to a sense of claustrophobia in relation to the house however she does state, ‘I have to get out of this bloody little town.’ (p. 83) In fact she is speaking of the need to escape the house in Lutana and her father. Angel Day is the opposite. Living in a particular place and having fixed shelter is important for her and her six children (at least initially) and this is demonstrated by an exchange with Normal where she states that ‘he made her stomach sick by thinking she should go and live like a dog in the bush’. (p. 16) Normal Phantom largely excludes himself from the house while Angel Day is almost constantly associated with domestic space until she abandons the house at the conclusion of her narrative. Leaving the house has devastating consequences for Angel as a character and her prior knowledge of the potential dangers of public space for her might explain her initial attachment to the house.

Neither Dolly nor Oriel portrays any sentimental attachment to the house on Cloud Street until the conclusion of the novel. This is a contrast to Quick who has a clear attachment to the house and to Sam and Lester who seem far more comfortable in its space. The house appears to be a space for men and ‘good’ mothers such as Rose Pickles eventually becomes. The birth of baby Harry coincides with Rose’s change of heart regarding the house. After the birth of Harry, Dolly and Oriel regain the space of the house. The mothering capacities of both women have been restored by their status as grandmothers. Dolly, for example, drags her friends down to the
Cloud Street house to see her grandson. (p. 390) Oriel and Dolly also take a symbolically domestic role when Oriel returns to the house.

The little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman folded end to end till the tent was a parcel that they hefted to their shoulders across the greensmelling grass, and they went inside the big old house whose door stood open, pressed back by the breeze they made in passing. (p. 426)

The act of folding a tent mimics the domestic act of folding bedsheets. In a similar way, Dolly’s capacity to be involved in the domestic sphere is symbolised by her contribution of white linen napkins at the picnic at the conclusion of the narrative.

In The Great World, Vic also demonstrates a level of nostalgia for the house. Returning to Australia from internment during the Second World War, he is drawn back to the house of the Warrender family. Vic had spent some years of his adolescence in this house where he was happily fostered after the death of his father. Initially he has to overcome both his sense that the war is not over for him psychologically and the shame he attaches to that notion:

He was home, he accepted that. It was a fact. But some stubbornness in him, a sense of outrage that he would not relinquish, still kept him captive, not to a place but to a condition. (p. 204)

When Vic finally returns to the Warrender house he is struck by the way that: ‘Some impression of presence had remained here and was waiting to be filled. He could with no difficulty at all, step into it now as if he had never left’. (p. 217) For Vic, the sense of shelter within the home is centred on the space of the kitchen: ‘It was a different world out here.’ (p. 260) He fantasises that Meggsie, the housekeeper, might be his mother and he, a factory or mine worker. What does this fantasy reveal? He is never totally comfortable with his good fortune and he is always conscious of his humble early childhood. The kitchen and Meggsie’s simple acceptance of him is as close as he comes to belonging and to a sense of peace
within himself. He is always, elsewhere, an outsider. The kitchen is where Vic feels most comfortable. Digger, who has also experienced the trauma of war, comes to respond to the notion of the house with nostalgia in much the same way as Vic. Central to this sense of nostalgia are the images he has carried with him throughout the war such as that of his mother pegging out the washing.

The character of Stephen in *The Children* also experiences this sense of nostalgia in relation to the house. He is drawn home after a long absence because of his father’s hospitalisation after his fall from the roof of the family home. Stephen’s departure from his family home came after a bitter argument with his father and he has lost touch with his parents and siblings. Many of Stephen’s childhood memories are contained within his boyhood bedroom and symbolised by the board games on top of and stickers on the side of a wardrobe. The narration takes time to describe these items, particularly the stickers, in order to emphasise the contrast between Stephen’s largely happy childhood and the brutal break from the house as a teenager. This remembrance of happier times as a child is symbolised by the stickers. In a similar manner, Stephen’s father Geoff’s nostalgia for the domestic sphere in which his children grew up is triggered by the sight of one of their tennis balls wedged in the guttering. He also fondly recalls the weight of a baby in his arms as he hefts some tiles onto the roof. (p. 4) His memory stands as a counterpoint to that of his wife, Margaret, and her recollections of their children. She tends to recall her exhaustion as a young mother and, more specifically, the fear she felt in the role of their protector when a snake entered the garden: ‘It is standing with an axe held above her head, too scared to kill a snake even to protect her children.’ (p. 16)
The main male characters in *The Memory Room* also exhibit a sense of nostalgia in relation to the house. For example, Derek Bradley likes the gabled house with dormer windows.

Looking at illustrations in his childhood books, he had often singled out images of peace, and dwelt on them. In one of these pictures, a gabled house with dormer windows, set on an empty hill (a house that was merely portrayed as a background to the story unfolding in the foreground, and not intended to be significant), took on a special meaning and attractiveness for him: he returned to it many times, wanting to enter the picture, and to find perfect happiness there, on the quiet hillside. (p. 16)

This aside in the novel reveals a crucial element of Derek’s personality, his need for a sense of peace. It makes his action of giving up his relationship with Erika more believable. Vincent also reveres the domestic. He waxes lyrical about the Bradley home and the Sunday roasts he is invited to share. The ritual is a source of comfort and gives him a sense of comfort. ‘It somehow stood for family, and comfort, and shared pleasure: all the things he seemed to have found until now in daydreams – or else in the novels of Dickens.’ (p. 29)

Vincent’s pull towards the domestic family life seems at odds with his profession as a spy entailing as it necessarily does a level of isolation however it does make his eventual self-imposed isolation more poignant. Mandy is similar to most male characters in other novels of this thesis in that she has a public rather than domestic life. However, she retains a sense of the domestic world that her male peers either do not see the relevance of or do not understand. An example of the way in which Mandy retains a sense of the importance of the domestic realm is contained in the narrative about her experiences as a war correspondent. She is able to empathise with the despair of their host, Hana, in Saravejo, who gives Mandy and her
companion, Luke, a place to sleep for the night. She realises, as they leave the following morning, that Hana is distressed that Luke has spilled coffee on her precious velvet sofa: ‘It was only as they turned out of the front door that Mandy caught sight of Hana through the doorway again, scrubbing and scrubbing with a soapy cloth at a coffee stain on the sofa.’ (p. 141) Luke, on the other hand, remains oblivious to the quotidian issues of maintaining domestic order. Ultimately, Mandy is represented as having a double burden as a female war correspondent. She must concurrently bear witness to the public atrocities as well as the domestic disruptions of war. This idea of the inevitability of a woman’s role as partially a domestic one is complicated in *The Children* because love does not completely render the domestic realm tolerable and a public life does not necessarily create satisfaction. However, the solution to the dilemma of finding a satisfactory life lies in the domestic sphere as she chooses to be a witness to small domestic activities such as the washing up. ‘And her purpose now, she knows more certainly than anything, is to keep watch over these small things, these ordinary decencies.’ (p. 266)

Race is not a factor in the development of nostalgia for the house. Normal Phantom is finally reconciled to the house at the conclusion of *Carpentaria*.

All dreams come true somehow, Norm murmured, sizing up the flattened landscape, already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath. (p. 519)

Normal is expressing the same nostalgia for the specifics of the house as other male characters who have quite different lives in terms of their cultures.

This idea of nostalgia for the house is connected to the notion of poetic space in that it is the humble that is often sought out within the texts. However, by considering
gender in relation to nostalgia it becomes clear that this is often an emotion experienced by male characters or, in the case of Mandy, by a woman who inhabits a male dominated public space. It contradicts the idea that men should only be connected with the rational and with public space and it allows for more complex characterisations of them to be drawn in the texts. Nostalgia for the house is often experienced after some sort of trauma in the public sphere such as war or a hurricane in the case of Normal Phantom. As Jenny Keen suggests, if a person remains in the exterior it is because they have not yet met their limit of terror.

Marongoly George points out that ‘Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from.’ (p. 9) While she is speaking more generally of ‘home’ and its implications as space rather than place, it is equally true that in contemporary Australian literature the house is a place to escape to and escape from. Most of the characters in the texts of this thesis experience some level of claustrophobia in relation to the house. Although a sense of claustrophobia may be experienced by both genders it is female characters who are more likely to be confined within the boundaries of the house. The negotiation of public space, while often desired by female characters, is likely to result in some trauma or danger especially for women. It is also likely to cause them to be described as masculine in some ways or as grotesque. It seems as though there really is no place like home, even if it is a site to which some women reluctantly return. Home stands for belonging and it also stands in contrast to an unknown and possibly disfiguring (or monster creating) public space. To leave the space of the house is often to lose happiness. Aware as its occupants might be that the house is not necessarily sheltering it appears that, over time, it does become the space of preference.
Chapter Four

The ‘Australian’ House in the World

Literary representations of Australia and regions within it such as ‘the bush’ have traditionally been attached to myths about what it means to be a nation. In some of the novels of this thesis, however, myths that represent Australia as a nation are attached to the house. The most obvious example of this is evidenced in Cloudstreet where the house represents the myth of Australia as the land of opportunity. James Walter points out that myths of nation and nationalism can be problematic when he states that they have been used ‘to invoke exclusivist, even racist, attitudes.’

Further, Philip Mead argues that as Australian cultural life has been increasingly recognised as diverse there has been a shift in thinking about ways to consider representations of Australia apart from ‘an overriding and limiting concept of nation’ (p. 550) ‘Nation’, then, risks being a confining paradigm for the exploration of how Australian literature represents Australia. One way to uncouple myths from these limiting and exclusive ideas of nation is to recognise the diversity of stories that represent Australia. Some of the novels of this thesis engage with traditional Australian myths that have formed common narratives of nation over many years, however, many of the novels also recognise the fluidity of myths and reconsider them as a means to represent regions within Australia as well as Australia itself. By engaging with these myths this chapter does not seek to find an ‘essence’ of Australia. It recognises the impossibility of such a task given the variety of different stories of nation. Nevertheless, myths are powerful narratives and Bruce Bennett

suggests that ‘a modern nation’s ‘civilisation’ can be gauged in part by the stories its citizens tell each other’. He also argues that these myths ‘sometimes run in tandem with history, sometimes counter to perceived tendencies as communities reformulate their sense of themselves.’ (p. 17) This chapter asks how such myths are constructed through the trope of the house and how they might represent particular narratives of Australian life. It also considers the way in which myths attached to the house might intersect with character, plot and setting to construct a dynamic narrative. The currency of some of these invented narratives is illustrated in Mark Davis’ *The Land of Plenty: Australia in the 2000s* where chapters have titles such as ‘The Australian Dream’ and ‘The Enduring Politics of Us and Them’. Some of the novels are engaged in reevaluating or overturning myths such as these in order to imagine Australia in particular ways. For example, *The Great World*, with its main character, Digger, firstly references a popular myth of the Australian soldier who is courageous even in defeat and who values mateship and home. The novel then works to complicate that narrative. Amanda Nettelbeck points out in relation to *The Great World* that Malouf is not engaged in a deconstruction of set myths, he is rather engaged in a cultural process of representing myths that are already fluid and are used to ‘reconsider who and what it is that constitutes ideas of self-image, whether those ideas are national or otherwise.’

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In this chapter, I also consider space and how it relates to the house, firstly, as a way in which Australia might be presented and, secondly, in terms of its connections to character and plot. Australian life is represented in many of the novels by placing the Australian house in space, sometimes in its immediate surroundings, or within the nation, but at other times, in relation to the world outside Australia. Some of the novels are actively engaged in presenting new stories of Australian spaces. At times, space and myth act in tandem through the trope of the house to present a particular story of Australian life. This is the case, for example, in *Cloudstreet* where an imagining of the geography of Perth combines with several myths, not only about Western Australia, but also about Australia, in order to present a nation at a particular time in history. The house is the vehicle for this presentation because it acts as a type of capsule containing the notion of ‘Australia’. Amongst the novels of this thesis are three concerns in relation to space. One is the representation of the local; the second is an imagining of nation, and the third is the articulation of the transnational. At times these categories overlap. In many cases, domestic spaces act as metaphors for those representations. These different ways of representing space reflect new articulations of Australia through the trope of the house.

In a chapter of *The Poetics of Space*, titled ‘House and Universe’, Bachelard describes how a heavy downfall of snow increases the intimacy of the house by reducing the exterior to a virtual blankness. Historically, Bachelard’s European snow could be seen as the colonial equivalent of Australia’s deserts and oceans, separating, at a psychological as well as geographical level, Australians from the rest of the world and suggesting isolation. This notion of Australian space estranged
from the rest of the world, a space of exile, is a theme found in a significant number of colonial works of fiction. Often this motif of isolation has been connected to the Australian house. This is the case, for example, in Martin Boyd’s *The Cardboard Crown* which although set in the 1940s references the 1800s where the house ‘Westhill’, which is approximately thirty miles from Melbourne, is represented as a remote location and is contrasted with ‘Waterpark’ in England where travel to the cultural centre of Europe is easily achieved.

This myth of isolation is perpetuated, in relation to Tasmania, in *The Memory Room*: ‘Cut off in their native island from the larger world, they make do with mirages: states of delight more seductive than anything the real world had to offer.’ (p. 431) The house where Vincent spends his adolescence mirrors this sense of isolation. It is cut off from its external environment despite the fact that it is a suburban location. The novel represents this isolation by allowing no sounds to enter the house, no visitors (other than Derek and Erika) and no connection to other houses in the street. This deliberate motif of the isolated house is succinctly encapsulated in the poem by the fourth century Chinese poet T’ao Ch’ien that Vincent is so fond of:

I built my hut in a zone of human habitation.  
Yet near me there sounds no noise of horse or coach.  
Would you know how that is possible?  
A heart that is distant creates a wilderness around it. (p. 26)

As well as describing the house in New Town the poem symbolises Vincent’s private nature which is well suited to the occupation of spy. Vincent’s asexuality is another aspect of his desire for insularity. He is the character who best symbolises the contradictions of Australia as alternatively a transnational space and a remote
one. His work takes him out into the world but his sense of self is as isolated as his Tasmanian upbringing. He becomes even more isolated on his return to Australia shutting himself off, within the space of the house, from friends and colleagues as a result of the censure he encounters following his actions in Peking. He is described as having entered ‘[s]ome rarefied, private level where he had abandoned all normal rules.’ (p. 287) His house reflects that retreat from the world. It is set high on a hill and is not overlooked by other houses even though it is in a suburban setting. The dark, heavy curtains are half closed and the room that Vincent most frequently occupies is described as a hermit’s cell. Canberra is a very different place from Hobart. In the novel it is a transnational space where international allegiances and tensions, such as a mining magnate’s expansion into China and Australia’s policy on Irian Jaya are dramatised. Vincent’s home in Canberra, though, seems at odds with the notion of Canberra as a space that is connected to the world. His character is driven by the need for privacy and this suggests a certain unwillingness to engage with both the immediate and the larger world, which is reflected in the description of his house.

*The Memory Room* also characterises Derek and Erika as somewhat insular characters. Their only fruitful relationships are to each other and Vincent for much of the novel. Erika’s house in Canberra is similar to Vincent’s in that it is a very private space. No characters visit other than Vincent. The house suggests sterility. This is represented, for example, by a set of saucepans that is never used. The sterile house also represents the sense of remoteness that Erika has tried to counteract through a series of troubled relationships. Derek is less insular than Vincent and Erika. Nevertheless he is also presented as an introverted character and
this is reflected in his choice of ideal home. The house he daydreams of owning is
described as being on an empty hill. Isolation is closely aligned to insularity and
there is a sense that the Tasmanian environment in which Vincent, Erika and Derek
have grown up has molded them into insular characters. Derek’s knowledge of
Vincent’s life with Erika as an adolescent, for example, unfolds through the diaries
that are so central to the narrative rather than through conversations with either
party. After Erika’s death Vincent deals with his grief by retreating again. Each
confrontation with the world sees him withdrawing from those around him and the
houses he chooses to occupy and the space around them foster this.

Both the imagining of an isolated Australian space and Australians themselves as
insular, represented in The Memory Room, is not a uniform feature of Australian
literature. Recognition of links between Australia and the rest of the world has been
represented, for example, in narratives of immigrant characters in post-war
Australian literature. The idea that Australia was a part of a larger world is
imagined in novels such as White’s Riders in the Chariot (1961) with its Jewish
protagonist, Himmelfarb, and Park’s The Harp in the South (1945) where a myriad
of minor characters from different parts of the world are described as being settled
in various parts of Sydney.\footnote{Patrick White. (1961), Riders in the Chariot, Ringwood:Penguin, 1975; Ruth Park. (1948), The
Harp in the South, 1975.} It is also notable in later novels such as Richard
Flanagan’s The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1997).\footnote{Richard Flanagan. The Sound of One Hand Clapping, Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1997.} On one hand, these are
regional novels, describing distinct areas of Australia such as Sydney and the great
lakes area of Tasmania, but they are simultaneously transnational texts in that they
recognise the permeability of Australia’s borders. The tensions that manifest as a
result of the immigrant characters residing in Australia are reflected in their houses. For example, in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* the main characters inhabit a small hut in a remote area of Tasmania. The opening scene imagines Maria Buloh fleeing this home. She is also fleeing her experience as an immigrant locked in a harsh environment with a husband who cannot quell his demons. The novel complicates the myth that transnational Australia was a lucky country, a type of paradise far from conflict for less fortunate people from other countries to enter, in which the immigrant was able to leave behind the trauma of his or her life in another country.

In the same way as *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, *The Memory Room* describes Tasmania as both an isolated space and a transnational one. While on the one hand it presents an isolated Tasmania it also presents a post-war challenge to the myth of that state’s isolation. It imagines the idea that Australia could, after all, be an extension of Europe. Bruce Bennett points to the potency of this Australian myth in 1950s and 1960s Australia which is the approximate time frame of Derek, Vincent and Erika’s adolescence. Europe does, to a limited extent, come to Tasmania, through the narrative of Erika’s father as an immigrant. On the one hand, Erika’s home is in Lutana, a suburb which is described topographically as being one of a ‘small cluster of houses on that low, empty rise near the river’ suggesting isolation. (p. 51) However, it is also described as being part of a project to create an inclusive area of Hobart’s suburbs where immigrants might feel at home:

The company had built houses for them that were designed to look as European as possible, to prevent them from growing homesick: two-storeyed,

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steep-gabled stuccoed villas, one of which was now the home of Dietrich Lange and his daughter. (p. 51)

Despite the attempts to create a welcoming suburb for immigrants Vincent describes it as an ‘alien city’. The house itself seems quite ordinary despite its European facade as Vincent approaches it for the first time, yet it confirms his psychological impressions. On entering the house Vincent feels as though he is entering a ‘foreign land’, especially because Erika and her father speak to each other in German. (p. 62) The house, and the space in which it is situated, acknowledges the myth of Australia as a place of immigrant assimilation but it presents a sense of tension between Australia and other parts of the world through its representations of immigrants as foreigners. Erika’s father, with his dependence on his daughter, cuts a lonely figure in the narrative. The depiction of Erika’s house as being in an alien city serves to confirm the strangeness of her father. There is a sense that his incestuous behaviour towards Erika, which drives her character, goes unsanctioned because he is an alien figure in an isolated space. In these ways the 1950s and 1960s myth that Australia could be an extension of Europe is simultaneously represented and challenged by the narrative.

The novel Crush, like The Memory Room, describes a potentially isolated part of Australia. As Bruce Bennett points out, Perth has been seen, at times, as a space that is segregated because of its distance from the rest of the states of Australia.159 However, the novel does not dwell on this myth of isolation. Although Perth is not related to other parts of Australia it is presented as a space connected to other parts of the world through the inclusion of descriptions of men in Hyde Park talking.

159 Bruce Bennett. Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood, pg. 132.
together in another language. The area of Perth where the Alice Street house is situated conveys this sense of connectedness as it is represented as an open space with private and public places linked to each other rather than separated from each other. There are descriptions of neighbours such as Alfredo in his garden planting tomatoes and children chasing each other in the street outside the house.

Bruce Bennett states that, ‘new technologies of travel and communications have created a nation that is more aware of its place in the world.’\textsuperscript{160} Similarly, Graham Huggan argues that in the Australian national imaginary there has been a questioning of ‘a discrete national culture’ as a result of increasing transnational flows.\textsuperscript{161} Such a questioning is notable in recent works by Gail Jones in \textit{Five Bells}, (2011) and in Michelle DeKretser’s \textit{Questions of Travel}, (2012) which was awarded the 2013 Miles Franklin award. \textit{Questions of Travel}, for example, contains two narratives. The first is the story of a Sydney woman, Laura, who spends much of her time overseas and the second describes a Sri Lankan refugee, Ravi, who comes to live in Sydney. In this novel, however, the attempt of an Australian couple to be inclusive of Ravi is disturbed during an awkward dinner party that he attends at the home of his friend Paul. Paul’s wife is dismayed to find that she is uncomfortable with Ravi using one of her teaspoons as she has, as a child, associated dark skin with germs. \textit{Five Bells} is similar to \textit{Questions of Travel} in the way it describes the transnational flows that are a part of the culture of Sydney. For the character, Catherine, this varied culture is observed in the many languages and accents that she hears around her at Circular Quay. (p. 15) While none of the novels

\textsuperscript{160} Bruce Bennett. \textit{An Australian Compass: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature}, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991. p. 10
\textsuperscript{161} Huggan. \textit{Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism}, p. 10.
of this thesis depict the transnational nature of Australia in the obvious way that *Five Bells* does, some of them are nevertheless engaged in an interpretation or reinterpretation of the image of Australia as a continent that engages in the wider world. This is accomplished in *The Memory Room* and *The Children* through the juxtaposition of Australian houses and living spaces in other countries. Susan Strehle points out that: ‘The fiction of contemporary Australian writers reflects uneasy, even anxious national relationships with other homelands ’ and this is certainly evidenced in some of the novels of this thesis.¹⁶²

The genesis of the myth of Australian involvement in the world and, in particular, with Asia is explored in the second section of *The Memory Room* which is set in the 1970s at a time of a growing consciousness of Australia’s connections to this part of the world. The evolving relationship between Australia and other parts of the world is central to the novel. However, the fact that, in representations of the Australian houses, few characters other than family enter the house belies this sense of connectedness. In this way the house retains the sense that it, regions within which it is placed, and perhaps Australia itself, are insular spaces isolated from the wider world. In *The Memory Room*, the sense of isolation, described by the houses in Tasmania, continues when Erika, Vincent and Derek are posted to Peking. Interaction with Chinese people is limited: ‘China can be a somewhat grim posting: we’re cooped up in the compound most of the time, and kept from any real contact with the life outside.’ (p. 122) Despite this, Vincent does manage to form a relationship to the Lius and this relationship is central to the plot.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a new narrative in Australia, that Australia could not only be connected to the world through its relationship to China but that it could actually become a part of Asia. Christopher Koch is an author who often explores the complexities of the idea that Australia is a part of Asia and he does so in *The Memory Room* by contrasting Peking with Hobart in the middle section of the text titled ‘The Eastern Wall’. This section of the novel represents the genesis of the myth of Australia as part of Asia by referring to China’s new ‘open door’ policy and situating the main characters in that country for part of the narrative. Australia, represented by Canberra, is not imagined as a part of Asia as yet but those in power in the capital are clearly interested in developing relationships with those countries. However, the novel also complicates the possibility of Australia becoming a part of Asia by focusing on the divergences between Australia and China through the trope of the house. Images of domestic life in Peking are contained in glances:

> Through open doorways, Bradley glimpsed the few possessions of its inhabitants: a table and a tin washbasin; a curtained bed; a singlet hung to dry on a line that stretched across the room; a bicycle propped against a table. (p. 121)

This is sharply contrasted with the spacious homes in Australia particularly Erika’s house which has three bedrooms and three bathrooms although she lives alone. It also has a large kitchen with ‘long, gleaming counters, stainless steel oven, built in, double-doored refrigerator, and new copper pots dangling in order of size from their hooks, although she doesn’t cook for herself. (p. 334) Her house represents her drive for success symbolised in the way she proudly shows Vincent through its rooms. Unlike Erika’s Canberra house and Vincent’s Tasmanian one where he

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163 Bruce Bennett. *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood*, p. 25
occupied the entire upper floor of the house in New Town, the Lius inhabit a cramped space. Their bedroom, for example, doubles as a dining room and an indoor laundry. *The Memory Room* also sets up China and Australia in opposition to each other in the depiction of the domestic objects. ‘Modern’ Australia is contrasted with ‘Victorian’ China. Professor Liu and his wife are represented as ‘living in comparative luxury’ by Chinese standards, particularly because their apartment contains a telephone. Their apartment is described as being one of many that are ‘Victorian’ in their grimness. (p.152) Derek notes the shabbiness of the Liu’s apartment:

> The books gave the sitting room a civilized air, but the shabbiness of the apartment shocked him, and he felt a stab of pity. Here was the kind of courageous, self-respecting poverty that had almost vanished in the West; yet this was the home of one of the most eminent scholars in China. (p. 154)

In contrast Vincent’s home in Tasmania contains a large antique ‘Victorian’ dining table, sideboard and wine table. (p. 4) The term ‘Victorian’ here has two quite separate meanings, one suggesting poverty and the other conveying the image of antiques of some value.

The representation of smells and colour are similarly used in *The Memory Room* to illustrate differences between the two countries. The alien smell of the Great Leap Forward floor polish in Derek’s apartment is a symbol of this difference. Similarly, Derek’s most immediate reaction to China is one of shock because of the grime and smell of drains and his friend Vincent suggests that he should think of himself as living in the period of the Middle Ages. The smells of drains and rotting vegetables contrast with the smell of burning leaves in well-tended gardens of Tasmanian homes. Colour is also used to contrast dwellings in China with Vincent’s house in
New Town. China’s dwellings are grey and grim and contrast sharply with the orange roof, yellow picket fence and the mustard-coloured exterior of the sunroom of the house in Tasmania. The lack of colour in the homes in Peking reflects a particular view of China’s communist regime as insisting on drab uniformity. These disparate representations of houses in China and Australia also suggest a greater socio-economic wealth in Australia. By representing these differences between the two differing living spaces, The Memory Room re-evaluates the myth of Australia as a part of Asia describing differences that potentially create a cultural gulf.

Privacy is a significant concept attached to the myth of the Great Australian Dream of a house separated from its neighbours by the size of the block on which it is built. This contrasts with the high level of scrutiny imagined as part of Vincent and Derek’s experience of China. For example, shortly after his arrival in Peking, Derek complains about the quality of the telephone line in his apartment. Vincent replies, ‘Give our friends time to adjust their equipment.’ (p. 120) After their visit to Professor Liu, Vincent points out to Derek the vulnerability to spying that the couple must endure stating: ‘Can you picture the hell he lives in – a man of his sensibilities, surrounded by stupid inquisitors? By spies for the party like that odious Wenfu? ‘(p. 202) Scrutiny represented through the trope of the house advances the plot as it causes Dorothy Liu to feel anxious after Vincent’s confrontation with Wenfu in the Liu’s apartment. Eventually she reports Vincent’s actions to Chinese bureaucrats leading to his expulsion from China. The level of surveillance, which is represented as standard in China, stands in contrast to the lives of Vincent and Erika as adolescents in Tasmania. Firstly, they are unsupervised to the extent that they are able to engage in night-time spying through
windows in houses in New Town. Secondly, this invasion of privacy is represented as a game. Although this act of spying suggests in a light-hearted way that privacy in Tasmanian homes is not absolute, the secret room where Vincent’s files and diaries are stored clearly represents the idea of privacy in the house. These differences in privacy and scrutiny point to a cultural divide between Australia and China.

Another myth concerning Australia’s relationship to Asia is represented in The Memory Room where a sense of Australia as a place that is politically liberal in contrast to China is imagined. One of the invented narratives that has attached to Australia’s self-image is that Australia is a space where freedom to hold individual beliefs is valued. The Memory Room explores this myth by contrasting descriptions of the space of the house. China is constructed as a space where characters are wary of expressing any opinion that might be construed as opposing the official Chinese perspective. The Lius are circumspect in their conversation with Vincent and Derek while the supposed spy, Wenfu, is in their apartment. They seem powerless to prevent him, as someone whose loyalties lie clearly with the state, from entering their home and being rude to Vincent and Derek. Instead of ejecting him the Lius grow increasingly nervous in his company. The setting of the Lius’ apartment is a space within which the anxiety about the relationship of China and Australia plays out through the characters of Vincent and Wenfu. They are imagined as engaging in a discussion of literature where their philosophies are at odds with each other. Vincent argues for literature being divorced from propaganda in direct opposition to Wenfu, which increases the sense of hostility that Wenfu feels towards him. These tensions between Australia’s myth of freedom of expression as opposed to
the myth of China’s tight control over literature and other expressions of life in China play out in the space of the apartment and create a driving force for Vincent’s actions when he attempts to expedite the relocation of the Lius.

The contrast between the familiar and unfamiliar is a further marker of difference that occurs in representations of the house in Tasmania and China in *The Memory Room*. The ritual of supper in China is juxtaposed with that of supper in Tasmania. Derek’s first meal in Peking is a ‘very tough chicken which was accompanied by its feet.’ (p. 119) Derek is repulsed by the feet and fills up on the steam buns that accompany the meal. The Chinese meal contrasts sharply with the suppers at Derek’s childhood home. Derek’s mother followed a ritual of cooking a roast and a chocolate cake that Vincent associates with ‘family, and comfort, and shared pleasure’. (p. 29) By association, comfort and shared pleasure, as well as a sense of family, is not represented as part of Chinese culture and it adds to the idea of China as a nation that is very different from Australia. Although *The Memory Room* depicts the genesis of the myth of Australia as a part of Asia it complicates this through the use of contrast.

As in *The Memory Room*, *The Great World* complicates the idea of Australia as a part of the world. At one point in the narrative it seems as though the war has influenced Digger’s perspective on Australia as an isolated space. Before he returns to Sydney he has a sense of the world and its possible impact on Australia. For example, rumours in the last days of the war include the notion that the Japanese army is at Coff’s Harbour or that they have ‘set up a puppet government at Townsville’. (p. 165-166) These rumours signal the notion of Australia becoming
more aware of its place in the world at the conclusion of the war. For some time, Digger and Vic bring their experiences of Malaya and Thailand home with them and in this way the world enters Australia and their homes through their psychological states. For example, Digger has a memorised list of soldiers who were interned with him: ‘his head now was filled with their names, and he had given his word, officially, and was afraid in his weakened state that he forget one of them, let it slip.’ (p. 193) On his return from war Vic is disturbed. The trauma of war has followed him home and affects his psychological state of mind for a period of time. He is described during his first visit to Digger after his return to Australia as a ghost:

He was standing there in an old army coat that fell to his ankles, all chapped and unshaven, with a short back and sides and his blondy hair sticking up in peaks. You could have blown him over with just a puff. (p. 6) His reluctance to return to the Strathfield home is a consequence of his sense that the war has utterly changed him. It also relates to the fact that he doesn’t feel as though he should be in the Warrender house other than when he is in the kitchen with Meggsie.

In The Great World, the world is brought to Australia through Digger’s character. As a child he is obsessed with atlases and maps and he brings a sense of Australia as a country aware of its connections to the rest of the world into the space of the house when he spends time looking at them:

*Patagonia, the Pamir Plateau, the Great Bear Lake.* You let these names fall into your head and, by some process of magic, real places came into existence, small enough to find a place there with other names and places, as they also fitted on a page of the atlas, but existing as well in a latitude on the globe that you could actually travel to, where there were immensities of water and rock and sky. (p. 196)
However, it is significant that Digger’s only experience of other countries is confined to his period of incarceration in Malaya and Thailand in much the same way as the mythical Diggers’ experience with the greater world was confined to their time as soldiers in overseas wars. This idea of a circumscribed relationship to the world is echoed, on one level, in the somewhat ironic title of the novel. However, *The Great World* also stands for all the ways in which space is imagined by various characters. It represents the myth of a coming of age whereby Australia becomes a part of the world through war. While the war represents a kind of opening up of Australia to the outside this connection of Australia to the world is confined to a particular period.

So there they were, all three, united again. Back, Digger thought, despite the seven years and all that had happened, in a life that was barely different in its essentials from the one he had left. (p. 229)

Australia, in many ways, quickly reverts to being much the same as it has always been for Digger. Digger’s return to the house of his childhood represents this idea of a smaller and more knowable world.

If the world is brought into Australia, Australia is also brought into the world, while Digger and his friends are prisoners-of-war, through the stories of Mac’s life in Sydney at the house that he shares with his sister-in-law, Iris. The image of the house comforts Digger and Mac. The letters from home are important to their survival in the camp because they enable Digger and Mac to occupy a space in Australia within their minds. This is particularly the case for Digger. ‘He would close his eyes and imagine her being called to the door. The baker’s lad that would be, with a basket on his arm and the warm loaves covered with a cloth.’ (p.145) Australia, represented by the house, acts as a solace so strong that Digger goes to
Mac’s house on his return from the war ostensibly to deliver Mac’s letters however, he also wants to see the space that has sustained him. ‘The house itself, in Bon Accord Avenue, Digger could see it as if he had lived his whole life there.’ (p.115) Vic has the same connection to the domestic in the image he retains of the hallway at the Strathfield house. This image sustains him in much the same way as Digger’s images of Mac’s house.

In *The Great World*, space and time are often represented in their traditional contexts as a measurable entity, except on three occasions where they become unreliable and change into something unfamiliar. On two of these occasions these changes to time are connected to the space of the house. When Digger’s mother climbs to the top of the hill near her home and realises that Sydney, ‘a place she thought of as worlds away’, is quite close to Keen’s Crossing the space in which the house is situated is altered and she is no longer sure of her boundaries. (p.15) This new way of seeing space is reflected in her sudden revision of the house. It leads to her abandonment of the house she has invested with dreams of a particular family life. Space is also altered during Vic and Digger’s incarceration in the prisoner-of-war camp. In a similar way to that of *Carpentaria* after the cyclone, space is disconnected from time. At first, Digger tries to keep hold of time in that space: ‘In a place where so much had been taken from them, perhaps permanently, this business of time-keeping, which was after all something the Japs had no control over (it was between you and the sun) represented a last area of freedom to him.’ (p. 163) However, as he becomes feverish, time and space are altered in a way that facilitates his travel back to his childhood house. These slippages of time and space allow the novel to explore the concept of time as a linear condition and space as
tangible but they are also a means of developing the sense of the inner lives of the main characters.

The ‘Aussie digger’ is a type of war hero that is intimately associated with the myth of Australian involvement in war. The digger represents an ordinary ‘bloke’, a soldier who is resourceful, a ‘good mate’ and a stoic. Most of all, the Aussie digger is simple in his needs and aspirations and has a reverence for ‘home’. Digger is similar to the mythical ‘digger’ in most ways. He, along with most of the other prisoners-of-war, daydreams about longed for home and this gives the soldiers comfort. Digger’s reverence for home is illustrated in a part of the narrative where Digger is feverish. In his delirium he dreams of being with his mother helping her in the domestic act of unravelling wool from a jumper:

The thread ran between them, dark and fast, till the whole jumper, which he had worn through four winters and slept in, and which had his smell on it – sleeves, front and back – was gone, and there were nine balls of clean knitting-wool in her lap. (p.137)

Digger’s house in Keen’s Crossing is described as: ‘Not much of a house either. Just the gabled store, all weatherboard, unpainted for ages she thought and a lot of it gone to ruin, with, at the back, three pokey rooms.’ (p. 16) Vic’s first home is even more basic and the house in Strathfield is ‘dilapidated in parts’. (p. 88) In fact, all the houses in the texts of this thesis are either unpretentious or, in the case of the Cloudstreet house and Kuran House, have fallen from their previous height. The national narrative of Australia as an unpretentious space is preserved in these novels through the trope of the Australian house. A lack of pretention is also imagined through Digger and Vic’s nostalgia for ordinary domestic rituals and objects.
The myth of Australia as an isolated country is similarly overturned in *The Children*. The novel imagines Australia connected to the world. This world enters the house in the form of current news about other countries and through various media such as radio and television. For example, a radio newsreader speaks of an American reporter held hostage in Iraq. The family is connected to this event through Mandy and the possibility that she too could be captured while performing her duties as an International reporter. Similarly, the television has a report of journalist, Jill Carroll, who is missing in Iraq. The world also enters the house in the form of occasional phone calls and postcards from Mandy to her parents. On occasion, connections to the world outside Australia are symbolised by domestic items such as souvenirs from Bali or other overseas countries. The torn kite that Mandy sends back from Sarajevo is an example. Connection to the world outside Australia is also expressed by the family’s ownership of books about other parts of the world that form a part of the household library. There is, for example, a series of Time Life World books and a text about kites of the world. Tony and Mandy are particularly interested in the world outside of Australia. This is symbolised by Tony’s collection of *Time* magazines and the sections of the newspapers he has that concern world news and Mandy’s occupation. *The Children* is the novel that most fully represents the idea of a transnational world because the world is brought into the house through quotidian items such as books and souvenirs from countries outside of Australia. The world is also acknowledged through Mandy and Tony’s interest in it. More obviously, Australia is depicted as a part of the world through Mandy’s career within it. This is most likely a product of its relatively
contemporary setting and it points to Australia’s developing sense of transnationalism.

However, the idea of Australia as a part of the world is complicated in *The Children*. A complex view of Australian suburban life and its connection to the world outside of Australia is clearly signalled by the motif of the myna bird, an introduced species that occupies the lawns of suburbia, featured on the front cover of Wood’s book and represented as perching on the next door neighbour’s television aerial, ‘frowning out of its dark yellow-rimmed eye for a moment before flying off. ’(p.3) The myna bird, which is Asian in origin, is a symbol of transnational space. However, this notion of transnational space is challenged because parts of the narrative are as much about exclusion as about inclusion. This is evidenced in the narrative when Stephen kicks out at the myna bird to stop it entering the house. Tony struggles to understand Stephen’s anger at what he sees as vermin:

‘What’s vermin?’ Stephen slams the door. ‘Them,’ he says, nodding at the bird, which has been joined by another. ‘They’re always trying to get in the bloody house. Piss off.’ (p. 221)

Even though myna birds are a menace, Stephen’s rant represents one of the few times that he loses his temper. His diatribe is reminiscent of the perspective of some Australians to the intake of refugees into Australia. Similarly, the attitude of some Australians towards refugees is symbolised by the exchange between Mandy and Stephen about an ‘Adriatic salad’. The salad features Cajun prawns, a food obviously unconnected to the Adriatic region. Mandy argues that what she sees as a geographical error reflects the fact that Australians are insulated from and ignorant of the rest of the world. After an argument in a restaurant develops between the
characters, Mandy and Stephen, regarding the name of the salad, Stephen exclaims: ‘[T]hese people don’t even know where the Adriatic is, for fucksake. Do you think they care that bodies are still being found in backyards in these towns?’ (p.208)

This lack of sympathy and the attitude of some Australians to refugees is also represented by a ute that has a sticker on its rear window which reads, ‘AUSTRALIA: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT.’ (p. 84) In this way, The Children imagines the idea that Australia, for some Australians, is still a discrete space separated from the rest of the world and it also represents an attitude that Australia should be a space where those from some other parts of the world are excluded. The sense of unease at the ‘intrusion’ of the world into Australia is evidenced within the house itself through a confrontation between Cathy and Mandy. Mandy is watching the news about the massacre of numerous Russian children in Beslan on the television when Cathy enters the room. Cathy is disturbed by the news footage and changes the channel causing Mandy to argue, ‘What if everyone just said, its upsetting! Try living in it! If everyone was like you - ’ (p. 224) Cathy replies, ‘You know what, Mandy? Everyone is like me. Nobody wants to live in it. And nobody wants to watch it.’ (p. 224) Tony and Mandy act as foils to this perspective. For example, Tony challenges two young people who seem oblivious to the significance of Mandy’s occupation as an overseas war reporter: ‘Ever watched the bloody news? Heard of Iraq?’ (p. 90) In depicting these two opposite stances on Australia’s connection to the world, Woods complicates the myth of Australia as a multicultural nation. Tony’s insistence that he and Mandy are aligned both in their being witnesses to the tragedies of the world and in their sense of Australia as a part of that world creates the arc for the narrative when Tony, in his frustration that he is
not understood and his need to convince Mandy that they both witnesses to the tragedies of the world, confronts the family armed with a gun.

The myth of Australia as a land of plenty is represented in *The Children* and is constructed through contrasts in the homes of Mandy and Chris and Margaret and Geoff with an apartment in Sarajevo. As in *The Memory Room* this contrast is contained in the notion of spaciousness. In the case of the children’s parents’ home there are two spare rooms for guests. Both these spaces are the former bedrooms of the children. Similarly, in Mandy and Chris’s home there are ‘acres of benches’ despite the fact that Chris occupies the house largely alone. In the apartment in Sarajevo however, there is little space and guests must be accommodated in the living room. The Bosnian apartment is described as being ‘large by Sarajevo standards’. (p.138) Contrast between Australia and other countries is also illustrated in descriptions of domestic objects in living spaces. For example, the relative poverty of the Bosnian woman, Hana, is illustrated through domestic items: pillows stuffed with clothes and a sofa that is a treasured item and occupies a central position in her tiny kitchen. The reverence shown to this household item is a direct result of Hana’s ownership of so few possessions. Luke, who travels with Mandy, carelessly spills coffee on the couch that Hana prizes.

She seemed distressed, repeating something in her crooning, whiny voice, but they were in a rush. It was only as they turned out of the front door that Mandy caught sight of Hana through the doorway again, scrubbing and scrubbing with a soapy cloth at a coffee stain on the sofa. (p.141)

Stephen is also careless and ‘plonks’ himself down on the couch at his parents’ home in Rundle with a beer in his hand. However, there is a sense that his actions are not as serious as those of Luke because the same attachment to domestic items, the viewing of them as precious, is not manifest.
The Memory Room, The Great World and The Children work to unsettle notions of an insular Australia because the outside world enters the house through the minds of the main characters who travel out of Australia and return to it. The world permeates the house in a psychological sense once the travellers return. Mandy brings the world home with her just as she takes the space of Rundle out into the world with her. This is symbolised by her reinterpretation of familiar domestic objects such as the towel that is placed over the damaged legs of a boy in Eastern Europe that is similar to one in her childhood home and the domestic freezer in Mandy’s home that sounds like mortar fire when it is closed. It is also evidenced in Mandy’s deep interest in narratives of other countries, which she receives through media such as the television and radio. Mandy’s engagement with the world outside Australia has been damaging and this affects her interactions with the house as well as family members.

Two novels, The Great World and The Children, particularly associate other parts of the world with trauma or disturbance. In The Great World, the internment of Digger and Vic as prisoners-of-war is a time of trauma for the two characters, and the period of time that Mandy spends overseas is traumatic for her. In The Memory Room there is no trauma associated with China, however, the novel does represent that country as unsettling and this is particularly the case for Vincent. The representation of trauma or unsettlement entering the Australian house through the sensibilities of the characters is consistent with the imagining by Australian authors of a national anxiety in relation to Australia’s relationships with other parts of the
world as Susan Strehle suggests. On a more basic level it also represents the myth of Australia as a relatively safe space. This notion is encapsulated in *The Memory Room* where the house in New Town is described as ‘eternally enclosed by that capsule of perfect security which preceded World War One.

The juxtaposition between the certainty of safety in Australia and the threat of hostility elsewhere is a common device used to describe the nation. It is a feature of *The Children* where the opposition between safety and threat of injury increases the sense that Australia is a familiar and safe space. This sense of safety is represented through the trope of the house. It is disturbed however, by Geoff’s fall from the house’s roof and his consequent death. Nevertheless, the sense that Australia is a safe country is largely represented through the trope of the house. Similar binaries to those in *The Memory Room* occur. There is a contrast between the peacefulness of Mandy’s parents and Mandy’s own homes and the apartment in Sarajevo. Mandy and Luke spend the night in Hana’s apartment listening to the mortars across the city. The window of their small room occasionally lights up with the explosions. Hana relates that three people in the area where she lives have been killed.

She showed them how she had cried – rocking, mewling rhythmically, *hroo*, *hroo*, tracing tears down her face with her index fingers as she acted – and then she got up from her chair, and cowered near the stove – *boom, boom*, - and drew her own arms around her shoulders, crying again. (p.140)

Conversely, the Australian setting of the children’s childhood home represents a sense of security despite Geoff’s accident. This is achieved through contrasting domestic items in the Australian setting with those of foreign locations. For instance, the towels in Margaret and Geoff’s home that are described as fluffy and

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new are contrasted with the towel that covers the horrific injuries of the young boy in Baghdad who has been hit by an explosion. Mandy also creates parallels between things she witnesses in Baghdad and Bosnia and domestic sights in Australia. For example, a young boy from Baghdad has a similar shirt to that her father wore in Australia in the 1950s. Similarly, the boy at play in a war-torn country reminds her strongly of her brother as a child at play in Australia. Mandy’s trauma is, to a large extent, experienced within the Australian house and attached to domestic objects such as the freezer and a red bracelet.

She is staring at the bedside table when beneath a saucer holding hairpins and a tube of hand cream she sees a red, sticky pool. Her heart bolts – once, twice – until she makes out the glistening splotch as a wide, beaded red bracelet. (p. 35)

Mandy’s notions of home are unsettled by her experiences as a journalist in war-torn countries. She can no longer take for granted the everyday domestic world. She brings the outside world home with her. These memories enter the house with her on her return to Australia and she becomes a witness to the horror that she encounters overseas as well as on the television. She becomes someone who brings attention to the horrors of other spaces. For example, she pays particular attention to stories like the Beslan hostage crisis where at least 186 Russian children died and to the televised plight of a young Palestinian boy whose sister was killed:

She found she could no longer move easily through familiar rooms or streets; she felt a layer of something impenetrable – some thick, elastic membrane – between herself and her ordinary life. (p.136)

For characters other than Mandy, the Australian suburbs seem to be a refuge from the uncertainties of war-torn Europe. For example, Margaret sees herself as a guardian of the family but the dangers are far less serious than those faced by civilians in Sarajevo or Afghanistan. She supplies the family with ‘sunhats,
sunscreens, hard green vegetables’. (p. 25) These are items that might seem of far less importance in Baghdad where the main dangers are war-related bombs and missile fire. However, in The Children the notion of Australia as a peaceful country is rendered complex. When Tony sees footage of the Cronulla riots he describes this conflict as being between ‘the Lebs and the Aussies’. (p. 248) It plays into another myth, brought into the house through the television, that Australia’s sense of safety might somehow be ‘contaminated’ by those of other countries.

Three novels, The Children, The Great World and The Memory Room do represent a more cosmopolitan Australia in some ways. These are mainly connected to the making of a home in a difficult, foreign environment. Vincent for example, creates a home in Peking through the Cloud wall hanging that he places in his compound apartment. Despite the trauma that Digger, Vic and Mandy are subjected to as inhabitants of war-torn countries they are also able to adapt to circumstances in these spaces.

On the Sunday night, fellows who had been fighting hard the night before in rubber plantations on the island, or hand-to-hand on factory sites, Digger among them, were at ease at last, preparing themselves for the next of proceedings by darning their socks, rolling them neatly, and pushing them down the side of their packs. (p. 42)

Once Digger and Vic become prisoners-of-war, they quickly establish themselves as part of a small and close group that face the rigours of camp life together. Digger, Vic and the other prisoners of war create a sense of home for themselves to the best of their limited capacities in an abandoned amusement park: ‘They spent the first night cleaning the place up a bit and fixing showers.’ (p.118) Mandy also attempts to create a home outside Australia by establishing relationships to other journalists who are working alongside of her in other countries.
Australia is represented through a combination of space and myth in many of the novels. Some create a sense of Australia, or parts of it, by describing the space in which the house is situated. At times this is accomplished by rewriting traditional ideas of space. *Crush*, for example, rewrites the space of Perth. It (re)imagines the city in terms of the type of texts that might describe it. The novel ignores the geographical context of Perth and represents it as a place that could be described by a certain type of novel.

I wanted to know what a Perth story would be like. For this city, she said, with its superficial hedonism and its deep and rigid conservatism, you need a story with firmly established conventions. A murder mystery. (p. 26)

However, the house with its basic renovations stands as a counterpoint to the excesses of Perth in the 1980s and in doing so it contests the notion of Perth as a superficial and hedonistic city. In this way it presents and simultaneously challenges a myth that is often seen as typifying Perth.

*Benang* also combines space and myth to imagine a particular Australia. It is, foremost, a regional novel that describes the historical settlement of the South-West of Western Australia from the perspective of a displaced Aboriginal people. Description of the devastating consequences of settlement for the Noongar people drives the narrative and is peculiar to the South-West where a systematic attempt to detach Noongar people from their heritage took place. Myths contained in the novel work to reattach this heritage. The national myth of an Indigenous connection to land is found in the novel’s descriptions of that space as understood, at its deepest level, only by Aboriginal people. The representation of this idea combines with descriptions of spaces in their Aboriginal context to create characters that move
through the landscape in a way that emphasises their Aboriginality. For example, there are descriptions of Fanny Benang’s travels through the South-West where the integrity of the land is described. She erects simple shelters that do not impose on the land. Her way of life is contrasted with a ‘white’ understanding of land as a space where white settlers are ‘hungry to impose themselves on this country’ (p. 117). The houses of these settlers represent this imposition.

Fanny Benang’s bush living spaces also contrast with the various houses that Ern lives in where cruelty and the project of breeding a ‘white’ person from a ‘black’ heritage takes place. Harley’s character is reflected in these two disparate descriptions of the space of the South-West. He is at once both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous. The conflict between these two states is reflected in his attempts to dismantle Ern’s house. Despite Harley’s grandfather’s partly successful attempts to create him as the ‘first white man born’, his uncles introduce him to the land in Aboriginal terms. Much of this education takes place in camps set up overnight near significant places. ‘We went in among the trees and made a little fire, and smelled the sweet smoke, the salt in the air.’ (p. 188) Benang engages in the overturning of the myth that being Aboriginal is a matter to be measured in terms of patrimony and can be described by terms such as ‘quadroon’. Harley’s aboriginality is evidenced in his growing attachment to and sense of comfort in the spaces in the country to which his uncles introduce him. The novel also references the taking of Aboriginal children from their parents and their culture. It refutes the myth that Aboriginal children were not stolen but ‘rescued’. This idea is explored in terms of the house acting as a space where abuse took place and Aboriginality was suppressed. Ern’s house embodies this idea of a stolen generation separated from
Aboriginal culture. The re-evaluation of these various myths gives the narrative its impetus.

*Carpentaria* has the same sense as *Benang* of being both regional and national. It focuses on a fictional town in the Gulf of Carpentaria. However, its themes of Aboriginal poverty, bureaucratic intrusion and racism are national. The novel, with its nod to the novel *Capricornia*, is a rewriting of that space which inserts Aboriginal ideas of country into depictions of the land. The novel tells the story of the creation of the Gulf area:

Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. (p. 1)

Similarly, Norm interprets the phosphorescence on the sea as a sign that he and Hope are in the presence of the ancestral serpent. Traditional Aboriginal myth about the land is particularly represented in *Carpentaria* through the trope of the house. The ground underneath Number One House is seen by Normal as a place where the snake spirit has its nest. Angel understands land in a particular way too when she declares that the site of her house is suitable for her as it is within sight of lilies. The narrative, like *Benang*, imagines Aboriginal characters as being exclusively connected to the land. For Aboriginal people the country can be lived in whatever the circumstances. Number One House and the two-blanket shelter are tokens of this way of being in space. They can be easily built and rebuilt and are therefore adaptable to the environment. The ability to survive on the land is also represented by the survival of Normal, his son Will, Hope and their child Bala, after the cyclone that flattens Desperance as opposed to the obliteration of the white population. Space for Aboriginal people like Normal, is something that is
intuitively understood because he has a memory of the sea inherited from his father. This enables his occupation as a fisherman and a fish taxidermist.

It takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood. (p. 3)

This special knowledge of the sea is represented in Normal’s own space in Number One House, an amber womb where the walls are covered with fish. The insertion of Aboriginal connection to land, over time and in the present, works as a challenge to the denial of Aboriginal Land Rights.

Once the cyclone destroys Number One House, Desperance, and by inference the nation, space is uncoupled from a European understanding of time. This disconnection of time and space is evoked in the passage of the narrative where Norm survives in a way that makes it seem that he stood outside the hurricane that destroyed the world of Desperance and the world itself. It renders him timeless. Will also stands outside time, in the living space of his floating island of rubbish, after the cyclone. He stays on this island, with its plastic sheets as shelter, so long that coconut trees grow into ‘magnificent palm trees.’ (p. 495) In this way, the characters illustrate the myth that Aboriginality itself is timeless.

*Cloudstreet* is also regional in terms of space, yet national in terms of the myths it explores. The house represents some common myths contained within a nationalistic view of a particular Australia where eccentricity is tolerated; family is paramount; home ownership is a means of economic wellbeing; and tall poppies are cut down to size. For example, the house has been ‘reduced’ from its previous glory through neglect. Over time it has turned from an enormous house with ‘grounds full
of fruit trees and fragrant shrubs’ (p. 35) to a ‘big, sad, two storey affair’ with buckling windows and peeling weatherboards.’ (p. 39). The house also contains the struggling families and eventually accepts their eccentricities. It suggests the myth of Australia as a place that not only rejects pretension, but also endorses a ‘she’ll be right mate’ attitude. The Cloudstreet house is a place where larrikins and Aussie battlers reside. Sam represents the ‘larrikin’ with his gambling habit and his coin-stealing parrot. Oriel and Lester, in particular represent the myth of the ‘battlers’ who have walked off the land and opened up a shop in an effort to improve their circumstances. Their status as ‘battlers’ changes, however, when they create the shop at the front of the house. A related narrative is presented in Cloudstreet, that of the naturally resourceful Australian character. The two characters in the novel that best represent this stereotype are Oriel with her ability to obtain goods for sale in the shop without much money and Sam who separates the house into two sections in order to receive rental money. A further regional invented narrative that is presented in Cloudstreet is that of a safe city where, for example, Oriel is secure in her tent outside the house. However, Cloudstreet overturns that myth in the course of the narrative. It presents the moment in Western Australian history that is mythically seen to be a time when a level of innocence was lost because of the presence of the ‘Nedlands monster’, an obvious imagining of Edgar Cooke. The myth that Perth had lost its sense of complete security is imagined through Rose’s character when she states that she is afraid to be alone in the new house. The presentation of this myth sees Rose and Quick return to Cloud Street and it is this return that signals the completion of the narrative. In these ways, the house and the myths that attach to it most clearly represent the articulation of a nation in the 1950-
1960s. The popularity of the novel seems connected to the nostalgia for that mythical period of Western Australian history.

*Cloudstreet* also subverts the myth of a ‘white’ Australia by inserting Aboriginality into the narrative through the trope of the house. The Cloud Street house is the site of a haunting by Aboriginal ghosts. In the mini-series adaptation of the novel an Aboriginal character is seen standing outside the house on a number of occasions. The implication is that the house both attracts and repels him because it is haunted by the Aboriginal girl who died there. In this way, the novel and the film adaptation constitute an overturning of the colonial view that negated Aboriginal presence in Australia, particularly in a suburban setting. However, this reinterpretation is somewhat superficial because the only living Aboriginal in the text occupies a somewhat mystical role. It plays into yet another myth, evidenced in films such as *Australia* that sees Aboriginals as exotic. The myth of a psychical Aboriginal people is imagined when an Aboriginal character tells Quick to go home as if he understands intuitively that Quick is lost outside Cloudstreet. It is also contained in the part of the narrative where an Aboriginal prop seller senses the tragic history of the house and is repelled by it.

The novel represents Perth as an insular and isolated space. This is partly because it is, on one level, concerned with the regional rather than placing the city in a wider context. It also imagines suburban Perth at a time before air travel was cheaply available and when the internet was unheard of. However, the character, Toby

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Raven, describes Perth in terms of a myth that seems to sum up the representation of the city as an isolated space.

Perth is the biggest country town in the world trying to be a city. The most isolated country town in the world trying to be the most cut-off city in the world, trying desperately to hit the big time. Desert on one side, sea on the other. (p. 289)

*Cloudstreet*’s representation of a particular view of Perth as a state apart is symbolised by its isolated house. Although it is situated at the end of a suburban street there are few references to neighbours until the end of the narrative. The house could easily be situated on a deserted island if it weren’t for the shop and even here customers are not represented. There are no references to connections to the world outside Australia apart from brief references to Lester’s participation in the 1st World War at Gallipoli. The house is an enclosure where the eccentricities of the two families play out uninterrupted and unjudged. It also contains the characters within a tight space facilitating their close interaction with each other. There are descriptions of Quick leaving the space of the house and interacting with people outside the two families but this is detrimental to him and he is urged by his Aboriginal car passenger to go home. Apart from Quick’s brief period outside the house and Rose’s brief relationship with Toby Raven the world of the Lamb and Pickles families retains its sense of being circumscribed by the house for much of the narrative. For Dolly, that circumscripted is oppressive: ‘Now and then she gets up and goes out to the edge to look down on the rails. ‘They go somewhere, the bastards, she murmurs. I always wanted to go somewhere.’ (p. 375) Her restlessness at the potentially insular nature of her life in the city drives her character. Tim Winton states that: ‘Three human desires are uniquely frustrated in the metropolis: the desire for community, engagement, and shared
responsibility.' Dolly is the character who most often seeks engagement and a sense of community outside the house and who is frustrated in that search. For the other characters, Winton’s three human desires are largely contained within the house. Engagement with the wider community is achieved by the conclusion of the novel. It is the house, which has changed over time and lost its forbidding air, that creates this sense of community. ‘Gawd, everyone knows that house. They know the shop, our families. It’s like they’ve built something else from just being there.’ (p. 418) The house has become as Rose describes it, a ‘village’. (p. 419) It is this fundamental change in the way the space of the house is seen that creates a sense of satisfaction amongst the characters. A further representation of space is contained in the library where the ghosts of the girls reside. This space is different to the rest of the house because time is suspended there. The library most noticeably, represents the character of Fish who is drawn to the room and who is caught in a similar suspension of time after his accident.

In *The White Earth* the map at the beginning of the novel signals the importance of the regional. This is a narrative set in the rural landscape of the Darling Downs and issues that are specific to that region such as the history of exploration by men who hoped to find an inland sea are imagined in the form of haunting ghosts. A sense of isolated space is symbolised by the house, which seems remote despite the nearby presence of Kuran Village. William is the most isolated character of all: ‘For William, there was nothing to do and no one to talk to. He waited vainly for visitors to come and call upon his uncle.’ (p. 228) The isolation of the house reinforces

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McIvor’s uneasy relationship to the inhabitants of the village and makes the neglect of William, which is a vital part of the narrative, more plausible. In another sense however, the novel is a narrative about Australia because it is concerned with the national issue of land rights. The national preoccupation with this issue is symbolised by the house and tied to the question of who should inherit it. McIvor is the embodiment of the myth of Terra Nullius especially when he attempts to destroy the evidence that Aboriginal people have had a long association with the land on which his house is built. Further, the novel presents the idea that land rights should be determined by depth of connection to the land regardless of ethnicity. At the end of the novel, McIvor’s daughter inherits Kuran House but she questions the idea of any one group of people, including the Aboriginal people whose ancestors had lived there, being entitled to it in a way that reflects the ambiguity of contemporary national ideas of land rights.

No, if anyone from Cherbourg really wanted the place, they would have to lodge their claim, along with everybody else. It was fifteen thousand acres of prime grazing country. In this world, something like that wasn’t just given back. It had to be fought for. (p. 375)

The White Earth both presents and challenges narratives of Aboriginal and white connection to land as well as Terra Nullius through the characters and their desire for the House. William acts as an audience to these various myths. For example, his uncle tells him that the Senate will soon consider legislation in relation to native title. William is concerned about what that might mean for Kuran Station:

Don’t the new laws mean that people can come here, and you can’t stop them?
His uncle nodded in sudden approval. ‘Good, good. You remember. And who is it who’ll come here, whether I like it or not?’
‘The Aborigines?’
Yes, but we don’t hate them, right? We aren’t burning any crosses around here, are we?’ (p. 237)
McIvor’s daughter also instructs William that the land was not vacant when Kuran House was built. ‘You know, no one really found Kuran, and it wasn’t empty. Other people were already here.’ (p. 276) The presentation of various perspectives on native title to William is constitutive to the narrative.

Philip Mead asserts that: ‘Until recently Australian literature has been an imagined entity that belonged predominantly to the discourse of national culture and its institutions.’ I would argue that this is a relevant discourse because the novels of this thesis are still engaged in imagining the nation and its culture. Several Australian myths are represented or explored through the trope of the house in these novels. The myths include the idea that Australia is alternatively a place of opportunity, a land of plenty and a space where ideological freedom of thought is present. Two competing myths about Australia as a part of Asia or alternatively, as, decisively, a contrast to Asia are also explored. Invented narratives that attach to particular groups of people are also presented, in particular, the notion of land rights for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians, natural empathy with the land, the idea of the Aussie digger as a laconic resourceful person, egalitarianism and specific Aboriginal myths. However, the novels introduce new ways of seeing nation based on a more fluid definition of what ‘Australia’ might be. Some of the representations of the house in the novels, for example, indicate how Australia as a nation might perceive itself as part of the world. Other narratives are presenting an Aboriginal Australia. It is this, the representation of traditional myths as well as new myths that are peculiar to Australia, and their links to the house, as

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well as the depiction of the house in space, that render the novels in this thesis uniquely Australian. In a contemporary global world it is perhaps surprising that the Australian houses under consideration in this thesis, apart from *The Memory Room* are exclusive of the presence of immigrant characters and mostly devoid of artifacts from other countries. Few characters other than family enter the house. This is partly explained by the fact that five of the six novels are concerned with the notion of family. Nevertheless the fact that there are no visitors to these houses is striking. Taking into account the theory that the idea of home is contained within the house, Australia is imagined through these representations of who might enter the house and who might not. The home as a private space reserved for family suggests a level of exclusion that Marongoly George argues is one of the ‘basic organizing principles around which the notion of “home” is built. (p. 2) This suggests that the myth of an isolated Australian nation is still at play even in contemporary Australian fiction with a sense of the transnational.
Conclusion

Australian myth suggests that, as a nation, we love the house and aspire to the ownership of it. Over time, however, what is regarded as quintessential Australian domestic space has changed. An understanding of the representation of the house in contemporary Australian literature is an important step in the understanding of how Australians might presently conceive of domestic spaces. Although the focus of this thesis has been on contemporary Australian literary novels, I have included literary fiction written in differing time periods by a variety of authors, including novels written after the commencement of the thesis, in order to allow for a more comprehensive representation of the house in Australian fiction. Furthermore, I have chosen novels that imagine houses in many areas of Australia including rural, urban and suburban spaces in order to examine representations of many different Australian living spaces.

As a starting point I considered Australian dwellings in their historical context in order to provide a basis for the examination of contemporary ideas of living spaces as represented in contemporary Australian literature. This analysis led to the conclusion that Australian living spaces were historically makeshift, sometimes fragile and often temporary. It also established the historical place of Aboriginal architecture in an Australian ouevre despite Robin Boyd’s claim that no such architecture existed.168 It was found that the makeshift condition of the house and its temporary occupation had currency in the Australian novels of this thesis. The fact that the makeshift house still had impetus in contemporary Australian fiction

was perhaps surprising given that Fiona Allon suggests that Australia is gripped by a need to improve the house through undertaking renovation. She points, for example, to the popularity of various television series about renovation of the house.\textsuperscript{169} This is not, however, a trend that is reflected in the novels of this thesis where the makeshift is a consistent and unchanging quality of the house. Many of the houses in the novels were decidedly (un)renovated and this was no impediment to their capacity to shelter their occupants. For example, in \emph{The White Earth}, the once grand and solid Kuran House was left as it was, crumbling and unsafe in parts, yet it sheltered McIvor perfectly. Similarly, the Cloud Street house sheltered the Pickles and Lambs despite its run-down condition. The only house that was renovated was Tom’s house in \emph{Crush} where the stumps were replaced and the roof was secured. Even so, the house in Alice Street was subjected to the barest of renovations that would render it a safe space. In relation to Tom’s house, the act of renovating only what was essential pointed to the laissez faire attitude of his character. What does the makeshift say about the house in fiction? It says more about the characters than their houses. It points to a sense of personal contentment. It is a strong element of the conclusion of \emph{Cloudstreet} where both families are fulfilled by the house despite its dilapidated state. Both the Strathfield and Keen’s Crossing houses in \emph{The Great World} also reflect the idea that the house is sufficient despite the more dilapidated parts of the former and the non–intervention with the very basic structure of the latter. Why were these descriptions of the makeshift included in the narrative when they were often merely referenced rather than furthering the story? Of course, one obvious reason for the depiction of a lack of repair, for example, in \emph{Cloudstreet}, is that the characters were financially unable to

afford to fix dilapidated areas but, more importantly, these descriptions of a
tendency to the makeshift in the houses also reflected the unpretentious nature of
the characters. In this way the role of the house was to reflect identity translated to
fiction and illuminate the personalities of characters. This lack of pretension is also
seen, in myth, as part of the Australian character. To this extent, the house reflected
that myth.

For the most part, then, the house provided shelter to its occupants whatever its
physical condition. For example, the house in *Carpentaria* justified Angel Day’s
obsession with its construction in terms of its ability to shelter. In *Benang*, the
house was a more ambiguous site of shelter yet some houses, those built and lived
in by Aboriginal characters and constructed in a makeshift manner, provided a
sanctuary. The representation of the house as a sheltering space is a literary device.
The house creates a safe space in which the desires of the characters can be
considered or facilitated. This is the case, for example, for Vincent and Erika in
their secret room in Vincent’s home. The room provided them with a sheltering
space where their eccentricities could play out. Similarly, in *Cloudstreet*, the house
created a ‘village’, a circumscribed space, where the peculiarities of the Lamb and
Pickles families were tolerated. Kuran House in *The White Earth* harboured John
McIvor’s obsessions and it also held the promise that it might provide a refuge for
William, his mother and John McIvor’s housekeeper. In *The Great World* the house
was similarly sheltering and provided a benign daydream that sustained both Vic
and Digger during their time as prisoners-of-war. The house was also a safe place
to return to after the war.
The uniformity of a sense of shelter in these houses might have a cultural implication. While the novels themselves suggest a diverse picture of Australian culture and various houses are occupied by a variety of characters, from different social strata, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, women, men and children, battlers and larrikins, this diversity makes the similarities in representations of the house more compelling. The idea of shelter, which is so prevalent, suggests some common sense of the house as a sanctuary. Shelter is associated with the house in the myth of ‘The Great Australian Dream’ of home ownership. The dream is to own a small, secure patch of Australia where one cannot be displaced. The prevalence of the desire for such a home may well have its origins in the European settlement of Australia. The need to find a secure home no matter how basic and the awareness of the unhousing of Indigenous Australia could explain this trend. However, these needs were, in no way, ubiquitous. European settlers were initially content with the most basic of shelters and the idea of guilt over the unhousing Indigenous Australians remains a contentious issue in Australian society.

As well as a physical sense of shelter, the term ‘safe as houses’ has, (at least amongst Euro-Australians) until recently, been associated with a belief that the house is a secure financial investment. This is a persistent reason, in Australia, for obtaining a mortgage over a house according to Fiona Allon who states that:

"The strong conviction in Australia that financial security depends on the ownership of bricks and mortar is one of the most entrenched and powerful elements of the national psyche and make-up. (p. 10)"

The solidity of this belief that home ownership is a financially wise investment helps to create a psychological sense of the Australian house as secure in reality and this transfers to its representations. For example, there was little suggestion that the
Pickles or Lamb families would forfeit their occupancy of the Cloud Street house regardless of how poor they were. The house actually assisted to make the Pickles and Lamb families more financially secure. It would be interesting in further research using more recently published novels to explore whether or not there is less of a sense of the Australian literary house as a shelter, given the fact that so many media are suggesting that the dream is now unaffordable in Australia and that the house is no longer such a financially safe haven. Allon argues, for example, that the sense that the house, as a secure investment, is no longer a constant with record levels of debt and low growth in the financial value of the house clouding what was once a given. (p. 14-15) She also suggests that younger people are beginning to turn away from the house as an investment. (p. 61) If this is the case, perhaps a sense of the house as a place from which one cannot be displaced might be less inclined to be reflected in novels with a recent publication date. This in turn would provide new narratives where a sense of transitory or less stable characters’ lives might be reflected. However, as I write the Australian economy is experiencing an upsurge in the number of new dwellings being built and this might also be represented in future narratives in Australian fiction. ¹⁷⁰ For example, a sense of general hopefulness or contentment might be evidenced in characters in new narratives that take into account this new trend.

There are times, in some of the narratives, when the sheltering house ceases to act as sanctuary. In particular, this is the case for Erika when she commits suicide in the house in Canberra. The house is revealed as a superficial comfort. It represents

her failure to find lasting security. It is also the case for Angel when her second house is destroyed and for Vic when his house is inundated with sand. This sudden un-sheltering creates a crisis in the narrative for the characters and is perhaps experienced by the reader as shocking because of the persistence of the myth that the Australian house is a safe place. The representations of shelter in the house across *Carpentaria* and *Benang* were varied, not only because the novels were set in different time periods but also because the characters’ narratives were different. In *Benang* the exterior seemed to be safer than most interior spaces. The Euro-Australian house, for Indigenous characters in *Benang* was found to be, most often, a negative space connected to government assimilation policies designed to control: in these spaces the characters were deprived of access to family and culture, and subjected to abuse. In *Carpentaria*, however, the outside world was more dangerous than Number One House. When the house was self-built as Jack Chattalong and Angel Day’s houses were, life outside was more dangerous than life within it. Although this speaks to the shelter that might be obtained in a flimsily constructed home, it also illuminates the level of danger faced by Aboriginal characters in the outside world.

I did expect to see a greater residual sense of the house as being a less secure space, even an un-sheltering one, given the argument by David Crouch and Uli Krahn (explored in Chapter One) that the house is tied to guilt because of the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. Both Krahn and Crouch assert that a general unease amongst the Australian population in relation to the ownership (current or former) creates a sense of being unsheltered. The conclusion reached by both writers is that shelter is not possible because Australian land was stolen from
Indigenous peoples. Jennnifer Rutherford, in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces*, comments on a similar unease in relation to Australian land when she states that unpleasant or ‘shadow houses’ are as likely to come to mind in relation to Australian fiction as Bachelard’s felicitous ones. She states that, in relation to the Australian house, ‘its materiality is brought into question and its existence hinges on both exile and displacement.’(p. 114) The articles and (in Rutherford’s case) the chapter that presented these arguments did not differentiate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous houses though it seemed clear that they were talking about non-Indigenous ones. This seemed to be a significant oversight as it was probable, given the idea that (presumably) White guilt could be associated with the taking of land from Indigenous peoples and invested in the house, that different representations of the house might occur across the two cultures. This thesis, firstly, questioned whether or not White guilt over the displacement of Aboriginal peoples and a consequent sense of unease or discomfort was reflected in the contemporary sense of the Euro-Australian house in Australian fiction and whether that might lead to a sense that the house could not shelter its occupants. The answer to this question was found to be ambiguous. Three out of eight novels reflected the sense that the existence of the Euro-Australian house relied on the displacement of Aboriginal people. In the case of *Benang*, for example, displacement of Aboriginal people was represented as an inevitable consequence of Euro-Australian settlement and houses were built on land from which Aboriginal people had been dispersed. Yet, there was no suggestion of guilt over this displacement and the houses sheltered their White occupants. In the case of *Cloudstreet* the Aboriginal ghosts represented both displacement and cruelty and they also suggested a continuity of existence of Aboriginal people in the urban
Perth area. However, a sense of being somehow in the wrong place expressed by Lester and Oriel Lamb is resolved with the passage of time and the Lamb and Pickles families do become settled. This suggests that in the case of *Cloudstreet* any sense of having displaced Indigenous peoples (and this was never specifically voiced by the families) has a finite duration and is annulled by settlement over time, a suggestion that has some tenure in contemporary white Australia. In *The White Earth*, the idea of displacement was a central part of the narrative. However, here the depiction of this was complicated by the character of McIvor who claimed to have settled the land and taken over the house and to have a right to it despite the displacement of the local Aboriginal community. There was certainly no suggestion that McIvor harboured any sense of guilt over this displacement. White characters in the other four of the novels were decidedly unconcerned with the effects of dwelling on what could be seen as dispossessed land. Where there was a lack of concern about the history of the land on which a house was placed there was a greater sense that the characters were settled in the house. For Aboriginal characters, displacement was almost inevitable, particularly in *Benang*. However, in *Carpentaria* attempts to displace the Pricklebush community were unsuccessful as they simply rebuilt their houses. Number One House sheltered its occupants for precisely this reason. It would be interesting to consider a wider variety of Australian novels to look at these ideas of shelter, the connection of the house with a sense of displacement, guilt over displacement and settlement as a remedy for guilt. Such a study would involve considering how these ideas are imagined through the trope of the house and whether or not changes over time in Euro-Australian community sentiment in relation to Indigenous rights to land are observable in descriptions of the house.
Most houses however, were sheltering and there was little thought that the house was infelicitous. This is perhaps not surprising as it reflects the reverence for the house which is a popular evocation in Australian myth as Fiona Allon’s portrait of the Australian relationship to actual houses points out. (p. 61) Children and Indigenous characters were the least likely to find shelter in the house. The inference here is that the most vulnerable characters were afforded the least shelter. This lack of sanctuary afforded by the house moved the narrative forward, for example, in *The Memory Room* where Erika leaves her un-sheltering house and spends time in Vincent’s home cementing the friendship that is crucial to the narrative. The inundation of sand into Vic’s childhood home creates a sudden lack of shelter which, once again, drives the narrative forward placing Vic in the Warrender household where he is well sheltered. The lack of shelter for Indigenous characters, particularly Harley as a child, in houses belonging to white people in *Benang* provides much of the narrative in this novel. As a future project I would like to examine representations of the house from the perspective of children in order to look at ideas of shelter or non-shelter in contemporary novels and children’s picture books. Novels such as *Past The Shallows* by Favel Parrett (2011) would be included in such an examination.

I also assessed the houses for the degree to which they were capable of sustaining the key quality that Bachelard cites in his analysis of the space of the home. Were the houses represented in the novels of this thesis, overall, as revered as Bachelard’s houses? Many of the houses were ones the occupants were fond of but they were rarely as openly revered as Bachelard’s houses. A more subtle thread of
affection for the house ran through the narratives. For example, in their typically understated manner, the Pickles and Lambs families declare their affection for the Cloud Street house. Oriel sums up the sentiment towards the house when she states that: ‘You could say I’ve come to love this awful old house.’ (p. 410) Fondness for the house was evidenced regardless of the reduced circumstances of the more grand houses or humbleness of others. The areas of the house most likely to be esteemed were simple spaces that added to the sense that the characters were unpretentious. The expression of a sense of the poetic by some of the characters in relation to these simple parts of the house was consistent with the notion of what Allon cites as a peculiarly Australian love of the house.

While there is a general reverence for the house it is sometimes a space from which characters long to escape. Following Elizabeth Ferrier’s suggestion that the claustrophobic house is a common driver in Australian narratives, I examined the living spaces of the novels from this perspective. I initially surmised that any sense of confinement would relate to the fact that the house in the novels was enclosed. However, the sense of claustrophobia experienced by many of the characters was more complex. In relation to Oriel and Lester in Cloudstreet, claustrophobia was a reaction to a belief that the house itself was urging them out. Digger Keen felt a sense of claustrophobia because he believed that the child ghosts of the house at Keen’s Crossing made the house too crowded. In The Children, Margaret’s claustrophobia was symbolised by a particular art installation she encountered. However, her sense of confinement was connected to her psychological life as a house-bound mother rather than any physical attributes of the house. For some other characters a sense of claustrophobia related to the fact that the house was
reserved for family. There was a need to escape the confines of family (or one particular member of the family) and this led to the sense of being closed in. This was one of the motivations for the adolescent Rose Pickles in *Cloudstreet* whose desire to escape the confines of the house related to her negative relationship with her mother. In Erika Lang’s case in *The Memory Room*, her need to escape the house was directly related to the incestuous intentions of her father. It is perhaps surprising that the house, which is commonly seen as sheltering, might also be claustrophobic but that claustrophobia often drives the narrative forward compelling the characters to leave the house. Attributing this sense of claustrophobia to characters acted on two levels. It made them more complex characters and it compelled them outside the house so that their interaction with the greater world was inevitable. Why would it take the experience of claustrophobia within the house to force the characters out of it? I would argue that the house is seen as so sheltering that a sense of claustrophobia is perhaps the only compelling reason for the characters to leave it. The only character to experience claustrophobia and not leave the house was Lester Lamb. In his case the reason for remaining in the house had to do with the capacity to soldier on in the face of adversity.

Characters of both sexes often abandoned the house, at least temporarily, because of this sense of claustrophobia. For female characters it allowed them to interact with the greater world where in colonial fiction they might have occupied a verandah and thus simultaneously have been in contact with the greater world without leaving the sanctuary of the house. Although a level of claustrophobia and subsequent longing to escape the house was imagined and acted upon by both male
and female characters, the disconnection from the house by women was often problematic causing them to be placed in danger or to be rendered grotesque. For example, Angel Day faces danger when she leaves the house and Dolly Pickles is imagined as grotesque when she is found by Rose in the local pub. This enhanced the notion of an inhospitable world for these female characters and, in turn, helped to create the sense that the house was sheltering as opposed to the outside world. It is not obvious in any of the texts but this phenomenon may relate to the persistence of the idea that the feminine should be linked to the idea of the home. Female characters in contemporary Australian fiction tended to return to the house as a compromise to facing a hostile environment. Often, this act of return completed the narrative. In this way the house, whether or not it was originally inhospitable, like the house in Cloud Street, was still portrayed as a sanctuary. This is an interesting trend in light of colonial fiction where the house could suddenly cease to afford a sense of shelter – for example in Ellen Liston’s ‘Doctor’ and Barbara Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’.

For most male characters, the abandonment of the house was not a negative experience. Quick Lamb in Cloudstreet and Digger and Vic in The Great World were the only male characters who encountered danger when they left the confines of the house. In the case of Digger and Vic, their lives outside the house placed them in no danger until they went to war. While male characters’ lives outside the house were, for the most part, satisfactory they sometimes felt a deep nostalgia for the house when they were away from it. In The Great World, David Malouf describes the nostalgia for home of his characters, Digger and Vic, during their internment as prisoners-of-war. Male characters often returned to the house with a
new appreciation of it. This is the case for Quick in *Cloudstreet*. It is also notable in the character of Normal Phantom who vows to build himself a house after the destructive cyclone that decimates Desperance. This suggests a more contemporary linking of masculinity to the domestic. It is most obvious in *Cloudstreet* where Tim Winton has deliberately played with both masculine and feminine stereotypes but it is also notable in *The Great World*. Bachelard’s analysis of the house is limited by its lack of reference to how women and Indigenous peoples might view the house. This lack of attention has been addressed in this thesis specifically because the experience of the house and how that relates to ideas of shelter, poetic space and the world beyond the house was different in some ways for both female and Indigenous characters.

Settlement occurred less often than shelter in the novels of this thesis. However, six houses out of the many depicted across the novels provided settlement for some characters. Two of these houses were renovated in some way such as the house in *Crush* in which Tom was settled and the house in *Cloudstreet* which initially sheltered the characters but which became a site of settlement with time and after the renovation of the library. However, characters in *The Great World* and Geoff and Margaret in *The Children* were settled without the need for renovation of the house.

Bruce Bennett states that ‘One of the most common characteristics of Australian literary houses is their fragile insubstantiality.’171 This assertion was considered in the first chapter of this thesis where fragility was examined in relation to the house.

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As in the exploration of the makeshift, the main question in relation to the idea of fragility was whether or not the fragile house was sheltering. In contradiction to Bruce Bennett’s argument that the house in Australian literature is often fragile, houses in this thesis were more likely to be robust. There were only three fragile houses in the texts. One was Vic’s childhood home in *The Great World* and this did not withstand the encroachment of the nearby sand-dunes. In Number One House in *Carpentaria* and William’s childhood home in *The White Earth*, where the houses had a more flimsy construction, that insubstantiality did not translate to a house that was vulnerable or one that did not shelter its occupants. The fragile nature of these houses was seen paradoxically as protective of its occupants and added to its sense of robustness. For example, in the case of *The White Earth*, William’s wooden childhood house, with its crooked doorframes, was described as having a level of flexibility that houses built on concrete foundations lacked and this was seen to ensure that it would not crack when subjected to the movement of the earth beneath it. In the case of *Carpentaria* Number One House’s assumed fragility warded off unwelcome visitors. Fragility, then was, for the most part, no impediment to the sense of shelter. This is a concept that reconfigures the idea of fragility and may be a uniquely Australian representation of the house. An examination of representations of the fragile house in contemporary Asian and/or European fiction might well provide a contrast to these ideas of shelter and stands as a possible future project.
In a recent study there was strong evidence that the group of Australians known as ‘Generation Y’ see the house as a place to construct an identity. Fiona Allon also suggests that the identity of the occupant, as well as Australia itself, is connected to the house. (p. 29) The construction of these identities is often material and achieved through renovation. As in reality, many of the houses of this thesis reflected the identities of the characters. However, they did so not because of any renovation but through depictions of their structure. For example, Vic’s vulnerability as a child in *The Great World* was mirrored by the insubstantiality of the house in the dunes. Similarly, the Cloud Street house stands out from its neighbours as much as its inhabitants do. Vincent’s house in Canberra was fortress-like and this reflected his sense of being under siege.

Another question raised in this thesis related to the ways in which an imagined house might relate to perceptions of the Australian house. Specifically, did the houses in the novels of this thesis represent the fundamental qualities and experience of what is seen as the Australian home? This was explored in the thesis by looking at myths that were reflected through the trope of the house, the way in which the Australian house is situated either in a discrete location or as part of the world and, in a more general sense, in the way in which the house was valued. The thesis specifically tested Allon’s notion that the ‘Great Australian Dream’ had evolved by exploring whether or not the myths attached to the Australian house were constant or changing and whether or not new myths were emerging. The answer to this question was ambivalent. At times, traditional myths about

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Australian life were confirmed through the depictions of houses: At other times, new myths and reinterpretations of old myths were evidenced. One significant new trend involved the insertion of Aboriginal culture into depictions of the house in *Carpentaria* and *Benang*. A sense of Australia is evoked in the novels through the presentation, and sometimes through overturning traditional myths. Trends are discernible. Australia is seen through the trope of the house to be a country where relative wealth is normal particularly in contrast to countries in Asia and Eastern Europe. Australia is also seen as a land where freedom of thought and action is valued. It is an insular space where family is enclosed and others are excluded. These invented narratives which are often central to representations of the Australian house, ground the characters in a particular type of space. This is the case in *Cloudstreet*, for example, where the characters occupy a 1950s stereotypical version of Australia as a type of paradise isolated from the rest of the world. It is a space where it is possible to prosper through hard work in the case of the Lambs and through dumb luck in the case of the Pickles. The presentation of traditional myths in the narratives creates a sense of a particular Australia and this was the agenda in some of the novels, particularly in *Cloudstreet* and less obviously the case in *The Memory Room* where, for example, the myth of Tasmania as a type of untouched paradise was presented. However, the overturning of traditional myths such as the idea of terra nullius and the insertion of traditional Aboriginal myth in other novels such as *Benang* and *Carpentaria* ensured that a diverse narrative of Australian life and sentiment was presented overall. Yet this was not reflected through divergent ideas of the house. Representations of the house were remarkably similar in terms of their ability to shelter, their sense of privacy and the fact that they were reserved for family given their different locations, timeframes and
occupants. I would argue that the myth of the Australian house is less subject to change than other Australian myths.

The thesis also examined the relationship of the Australian house to the larger world through its consideration of the structure of the house and its relationship with the exterior. Bruce Bennett describes the connection between the house and its external environment as a consistent attribute of the house in autobiographical accounts by authors such as Tim Winton and Sally Morgan (in relation to the houses of their childhood). I anticipated at the beginning of my study that this connection between the interior of the house and the world around it would be evident in the novels of this thesis especially as a love of the outdoors is seen as part of the mythical makeup of the ‘Australian’. However, the opposite was true. Few houses had a connection to the outdoors other than Jack Chattalong’s house in Benang and here it was the sound of the sea rather than an opening up of the house that was represented. Vic’s childhood home in The Great World was connected to the exterior only when the sand dunes on which it was built overwhelmed it. Otherwise, the houses lacked a description of windows or even doors and were, in this way, cut off from the environment in which they were situated. The houses also did not reflect a connection to neighbours except for brief references to the smell of burning leaves from neighbourhood fires and the sight of a bird on a neighbour’s television aerial. Many of the houses were described as having verandahs, which are spaces that specifically create a bridge between the interior of the house and the outdoors, but these structures were not utilised by any characters and were sometimes unstable. Perhaps this phenomenon points to a contemporary separation in the lives of Australians between their interior and exterior lives. Certainly, the
house was reserved for family life. The houses were also detached from each other, insular spaces and in that way they still reflected the Great Australian dream of the house as a modest, family centred, sheltering space separated from its neighbours. These representations of the house as a closed space reflect the private nature of many of the characters and this is particularly the case with Vincent in *The Memory Room*: for him privacy was paramount. It is also in line with a recent trend in Australian architecture where there is a lack of a ‘seamless transition between inside and outside’.  

A sense of isolation speaks to the way in which Australians themselves have tended to elevate the place of family in the home to the exclusion of others. This sense that the house was reserved for family might explain why the houses in the novels all seemed so cut off from the outside world. This may be a changing feature of the literary Australian house. Melanie and Stephen Bruce’s study into the desires of Generation Y in relation to the house found that that generation valued the house’s ability to act as a space for entertaining. (p. 4) In consideration of that fact it may be that a growing number of Australian novels will connect characters other than family with the house. This is evidenced in recent novels like *The Slap* (2008) which describes a (socially disastrous) backyard barbeque for guests outside the family circle.

If the novels featured insular houses how did those houses relate to the wider world? A variety of depictions were found in the novels depending on their major themes. *Cloudstreet* was a regional novel. The world outside Cloud Street itself rarely figured and this was reflected in the fact that the house was reserved for

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family. *The Great World* and *The White Earth* are simultaneously regional and national novels, with the setting restricted to specific places in Australia and the narratives attached to the house, such as those about land rights, being national. Kuran House reflected this duality through the map of the area at the front of the book showing the region of the Darling Downs while the house was the site of a national push for White Land Rights. In *Benang*, a regional perspective was paramount because the narrative was particularly concerned with Nyoongar history, however, Indigenous dispossession and racism, in general, were also represented in the novel. The houses reflected this as they were firmly located in a particular region but were also ubiquitous and likely to be found anywhere in Australia where Indigenous rights to land and White dispossession of Indigenous land occurred. In *The Memory Room*, *The Children* and *Crush*, the regional and the transnational were both represented as the focus shifted between Tasmania, China and Canberra. In *The Children* this sense of the transnational was symbolised by the entry of news about other nations entering the house by various media. Mandy also brought the world she experienced as a war correspondent back to her childhood home rendering the house a transnational space.

Often the context of the house, its relationship to the exterior world, was a significant factor in the motivations of the characters. For example, Erika and Vincent experienced the houses in Newtown and Lutana as isolated in the same way as Tasmania itself and this gave them the impetus to leave the state for the world outside it. In contrast, the Cloud Street house was unrelated to the larger world, other than a few local sites such as the Mint, and the characters were content within its boundaries.
Houses that had a sense of the transnational nature of Australia were found in more recently published novels though the houses were conventionally Australian. Ideas of the transnational in architecture are a recent trend in the design of the ‘Australian’ house according to Anna Johnson who states that international conventions are being applied to new houses in Australia.¹⁷⁴ I would like to see if, in future works of fiction, the imagining of the house within a transnational space is reflected in its architecture. It would also be interesting to see if representations of the house in future publications of Australian texts continue to establish a sense of a transnational Australia. Novels such as Michelle de Kretser’s *Questions of Travel*, published in 2012, suggest this might be the case.

The mode of representing the houses was, in all cases, realistic with houses often afforded conventional descriptions concentrating on structure and building materials. This was a device that added to the realism of the narratives. It grounded the characters in a recognisable world so that their actions and experiences outside the house also seemed realistic. This was particularly the case in *Benang* where the more magical element of the Harley’s character, his ability to float, took place in both a house and a world that was utterly plausible. The more fantastical elements of some houses, such as the Cloud Street house, with its ability to convey disapproval of the Lamb and Pickles families, were rendered conceivable because it was, in all other ways, described in realistic terms. The realism that attached to the houses was also reflected in the reverence for everyday or ordinary domestic items.

This was the case, for example, in *The Great World* where domestic items were described in a simultaneously realistic yet poetic way. In *Carpentaria*, realism was played off against the supernatural throughout the narrative. For example, the day-to-day actions of the characters in Number One House were at odds with Will’s dream-like occupation, after the hurricane, of the island of rubbish, for a period long enough for a coconut to transform into a magnificent palm tree. The two houses occupied by Angel, reflected this device of magic realism because they were simultaneously ordinary in their construction within their particular settings, and extraordinary (at least from a White Australian viewpoint) in their ability to influence the actions and sensibilities of both people and animals.

The houses of this thesis acted as drivers of the various narratives. This was the case in *The White Earth*, for example, where McIvor’s passion for Kuran House and its surrounding land led to his obsessive drive to firstly own and then retain it. The possible ownership of Kuran House, with William as potential heir, also motivated William’s mother to move to the house, driving the narrative forward. Similarly, in *Cloudstreet*, the house drives the narrative forward. It brings the Lamb and Pickles families into contact with each other. It acts as a source of income and a shelter for both families providing them with a secure base from which they interact with each other. It also acts as the catalyst for Quick to leave the family because of its moaning.

In the future it would be fruitful to update the work of this thesis through exploration of more current Australian texts. It would raise the question of whether or not representations of the house have changed in line with the ageing population,
rising cost of homeownership and rents in Australia and with the trend to inner city living and greater housing density. One hypothesis is that there would be a different configuration of dwellers in the house as shared housing gains momentum in Australia and that this would precipitate new depictions of relationships between characters. There might also be a change in the form of the house with apartments and flats replacing separate dwellings. Tim Winton’s *Eyrie* would be an interesting novel to consider in this light because the apartments that are a feature of this novel frame the lives of the three main characters. The closeness of living spaces to one another also allows some sense of community to develop between the protagonist and his neighbours. These changes in representation of the form of the house might also increase a sense of claustrophobia for the characters. A further hypothesis is that as Australia grows more and more conscious of its place in the world there would be a growing tendency for narratives to demonstrate a sense of the world entering the house. This thesis attempts to provide a firm basis for further examination of current texts and their representations of shelter, the makeshift, the world and the interior of the house. It also provides a basis for the exploration of other areas of representations of the house. A further area for consideration would involve what is termed ‘migrant literature’. *Questions of Travel* (2012) and *The Slap* (2008) come to mind as possible novels for consideration. One hypothesis here is that different ideas of the house as shelter and the makeshift might be evident in novels written by those migrant writers whose relationship to Australia is less than two generations old. In texts written by migrant writers an exploration of the sense of space might also expose new ways of representing Australia.
A further area of examination relates to Jennifer Rutherford’s idea of ‘shadow houses’. This study could encompass texts written in different time periods from the colonial to the present. In this context, novels about ‘ghost’ houses such as *Cloudstreet* and even representations of homelessness would be fruitful to study. The hypothesis here would centre on whether or not characters could be sheltered in these houses or outside them. The Catchprice family home represented in Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector* (1991) would be one ‘shadow house’ to include. One novel to consider in relation to homelessness would be Tony Birch’s *Blood* (2011) which features two siblings who are homeless for much of the narrative. Such representations of ‘shadow houses’ or homelessness directly contradict the notion of ‘The Great Australian Dream’.

Apart from this thesis, the house in Australian fiction has not been examined in any depth although Elizabeth Ferrier and Bruce Bennett have both flagged its potential as an area of scholarship. Bennett, for example, suggests that interdisciplinary research on the significance of the house in Australian society would be a fruitful area of study. He argues that the ‘spaces we construct and live in inform our value-systems and imaginings’. The house is so central to the idea of Australian life that its abandonment is connected to trauma and danger for female characters and nostalgia for the male characters in this thesis. It is also a space that is often revered in contemporary Australian literary fiction regardless of its state of repair. The house is a vital motif in Australian literary fiction. In the novels studied, which

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represent a cross section of contemporary Australian fiction, the house grounds characters in a visceral setting that illuminates their inner lives.

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