

Outsider Architecture: the Literary Constructions of Eve Langley

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‘Outsider architecture’ references a continuum of unofficial constructions, from the tenuous envelope of found materials that a homeless person folds about themselves nightly, to the compellingly precarious sculptural artefact, painstakingly but illegally built, in a front garden or on public land. One way that the homeless deal with their vulnerability to harsh weather, psychological disturbance and lack of privacy is the construction of *ad hoc* shelters from found objects and recycled rubbish. These shelters represent one form of outsider architecture. Roger Cardinal notes that another form is the idiosyncratic construction of sculptural assemblages, also, typically from recycled materials, to form architectural structures, modified dwellings, landscaped areas, collections, monuments and shrines that seem to pop up in most cities, or anywhere there are people (169). All over the world, homeless people seek to provide at least temporary shelter for themselves, and at the same time, a certain number of people, sometimes the same people, engage in personal projects of construction in which the expression of individuality is as, if not more, important than physical containment or shelter.

While it is characteristic of outsider architecture that the creator lives inside his or her work, that it is a dwelling place, Cardinal comments that it is also always a form of self-portrait (178). At the same time, while the structure may in some ways be a shell, it is a membrane as well, porous, both a transmitter and a receiver. While the creator of outsider architecture feels, as suggested by the term, in some way outside of society, his or her creation undoubtedly engages in conversation with that society. The construction of outsider architecture provides not only a portrait of a creative individual, but is also a reflection of the society with which it engages.

This article will consider the work of one author, Eve Langley, as a form of outsider architecture and will suggest that the physical entity formed by Langley’s novels, as a manifestation of outsider architecture, provided their author with the hope of psychic shelter when she wrote them. Langley wrote at a time in which it was difficult for a woman to succeed as an artist, or to support herself financially. As well, she experienced a dysfunctional marriage and suffered from uncertain health. Despite these difficult conditions, she wrote compulsively, sending manuscripts, one after another, to her publishers, long after they had stopped publishing her work.

Langley’s novels are semi-autobiographical and offer a form of self-portrait; they are an assertion of the self, of Langley as a (very complex) woman, and significantly, as an author. Langley’s biographer, Joy Thwaite, notes Langley’s ‘obsession with time and immortality’ and the extant corpus of work by Langley suggests permanence in the form of the written word, and as an archived collection well beyond Langley’s lifetime (4). Yet, while the archive of Langley’s work is secure in the Mitchell Library, and stands as a monument to her writerly life, as a physical entity it exudes fragility and temporality. Thwaite describes ‘an enormous collection of poetry, prose sketches, plays, unfinished novels on brown paper and blurred jottings on Weeties boxes’ (4). As Cardinal suggests, a ‘compelling aspect of the outsider site is its tendency to embody precariousness’ (170). The sense of ephemerality that hovers over the collection of Langley’s written work in the Mitchell Library is also manifested in the nature of Langley’s novelistic oeuvre.

Suggestive of the precariousness alluded to by Cardinal, many of the conventional distinctions between published and unpublished work are undermined in Langley's case. On the one hand, all her extant novels were submitted to Angus and Robertson for publication, and, on the other, most of the novels contain letters, or fragments of letters, and allude to biographical detail that may, in other situations, be considered private. In the body of work that makes up Langley's novels, distinctions between public and private writing, and to a large extent, published and unpublished work, are broken down and become frequently irrelevant. Langley's novels repeatedly refer to each other, at times discuss the same episodes or events, and act as a linked, semi-continuous, if repetitive, narrative with multiple entry and exit points. There is an indeterminate and unresolved, even amorphous, quality to much of the textual construction of Langley's novelistic oeuvre as beginnings and endings mesh, and each novel ripples with allusions to and reflections of the events both previous and subsequent to those of its particular focus. The different textual constructions and shifting perspectives within many of the manuscripts may suggest loss of authorial control, but this article will investigate Langley's flamboyant textual style and large body of work as a deliberate response to the literary and social environment in which it was written.

The writing, publication, and archival history of Eve Langley is well documented. Her first novel, *The Pea-Pickers* was published in 1942 after winning the S. H. Prior Memorial Prize. Based on an episode in Langley's own life, the novel's humorous depiction of two young women dressed as men in the fields of 1920s Gippsland was well received at the time of first publication, and is currently in print. Langley's second novel, *White Topee* (1954), describes further adventures undertaken by Steve, the narrator of *The Pea-Pickers*, and is notable for its evocation of the birth of Steve as the reincarnation of Oscar Wilde. Eleven later manuscripts remain unpublished and are archived in the Mitchell Library. A number of other manuscripts seem to have been lost, or abandoned by Langley. Drawing on a letter from Langley to Nan McDonald of Angus and Robertson, Langley's publishers, Thwaite notes that in 1954, 'Langley was working away furiously on "20 books"' (437). Half of the novels extant (included those unpublished) are set in Australia, and half in New Zealand, and they mainly detail the life of a female poet struggling to make a living, find love, and generally find a place in the antipodean world of the mid-twentieth century.

Langley's writing is significantly shaped by her experiences as a young woman in Gippsland. Hal Porter describes Langley as 'bewitched like a princess [...] it was always Gippsland about the 1928 period stuck there forever' (14). The themes and construction of Langley's writing are also often associated with unfixed gender identity and disintegrating mental health. Both Langley and her narrator exhibited a profound attachment to Oscar Wilde. The importance that Langley's biographer Joy Thwaite places on Langley's identification with Wilde is visible in the title of the biography: *The Importance of being Eve Langley*, which opens with a passionate letter from Langley to her publishers. In the letter Langley begs for her third novel to be published, invokes her assumed persona, Oscar Wilde, and alludes to her time in 'the Mental Hospital' (1). This letter sets the tone for the biography, suggesting that the high emotion of the letter and its implied mental instability provide a significant explanatory context for Langley's literary oeuvre.

Yet, the large body of unpublished manuscripts in the Mitchell speaks of more than the mental ill health that is frequently associated with Langley. The physical edifice of her novelistic corpus (so typical of outsider architecture) is as striking a self-portrait as the biographical content of the novels. Consideration of the debates active within the literary

community of New Zealand at the time Langley was writing, and the nature and content of, in particular, her novelistic oeuvre, suggests that Langley may have been writing at least partly in response to local literary voices. Despite her peripatetic lifestyle and solipsistic tendencies, Langley was part of the community of writers living in New Zealand in the mid-twentieth century. Her writing was supported and criticised by this community, and undoubtedly shaped by it. This article will consider the part this community played in Langley's writing, the dual aspects of vulnerability and strength, alienation and centrality, exhibited in Langley's authorial choices. By examining Langley's body of work through the lens of outsider architecture, Langley's prolific literary output in the face of a largely negative local reception may be seen, not so much as the sign of a loss of control, but as a strategic, if eccentric, construction of an authorial presence.

During the 1930s Langley was a widely published poet, with critical support from other local writers such as Henry Brennan, Robin Hyde, Ruth Park, and Douglas Stewart, who also edited *The Bulletin* for twenty years.¹ In the 30s, in New Zealand, Langley's main source of income was the money earned from freelance journalism and the publication of her poetry in local and Australian newspapers. However, most of her poetry of those years is notable for its sentimentality and, like that of many other local poets, such as Eileen Duggan, was viewed as 'Georgian' by the new literary establishment emerging in New Zealand at that time. The most prominent voices in this literary avant-garde were those of A.R.D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, Allen Curnow, and Frank Sargeson. While Langley relied on journalism for financial survival, in 1935 Glover called journalism 'that literary mincing machine,' condemning the 'patronage of our daily press' as having too much influence on New Zealand literature (16-17). Wellington journalist and publisher, C. A. Marris, included Langley in his stable of regularly published writers, and her work featured in Marris's *Art in New Zealand* and annual *New Zealand Best Poems*. However, Marris himself was under attack from the 'new wave' of poets who were attempting to forge a new direction in New Zealand literature. Lawrence Jones comments:

The 'new men' of New Zealand literature who began publishing in the early and mid-1930s in *Phoenix* and other University college publications [...] were better at defining themselves against current movements than they were at defining their positive goals. Although there were some primarily positive literary manifestos [...] the 'new men' most insistently defined themselves by opposition, whether to an idea or literary movement such as 'Georgianism' or to the journalistic-literary establishment and the individuals representing it: the triumvirate 'Mulgan, Marris, Schroder.' (144)

In 1937 Glover wrote 'The arraignment of Paris,' a satire attacking Marris and, in particular, the female poets he published. Glover depicts Paris (Marris) leading a group of women poets on a picnic in the countryside. Langley is specifically mentioned as one of the picnicking poets in the opening of the poem:

Come down, Sweet Muse, come down! You mustn't roam
In realms where Gloria finds herself at home,
In realms where Eve with inky footsteps goes
Leading the dimpled cloudlets by the nose.

Langley's poetry is grouped with that of other women poets in what Fairburn infamously called the 'Menstrual School of Poetry.' Keith Sinclair describes this type of poetry,

commonly associated with an anthology known as *The Kowhai Gold* collection, as ‘sentimental faded Georgian work, away in fairyland, full of archaisms’ (242). The new movement demanded New Zealand poetry to have a unique New Zealand voice; ‘reality must be local and special’ (Curnow 1).

However, as Anita Segerberg argues, ‘[t]he demand to be ‘local’ and specific was not in itself a problem for Eve Langley’ (63). The desire for an overt ideology of nationhood, seen particularly in the polemics of literary figures such as Dennis Glover in the 1930s, and the later anthologising and, to quote Stuart Murray, ‘constant critical interventions’ by Allen Curnow, form a meaningful context to Langley’s outpouring of novels. Langley’s early novels, starting with *The Pea-Pickers*, are all set in Australia and may all be read as explorations of the dynamics of belonging and marginality in the construction of home in the Australian cultural and geographical landscape. Though all Langley’s Australian novels were written in New Zealand, they reveal a highly developed language of location, seeking and expressing strong relationships between natural landscape and local Australian culture. Her evolving constructions of home are also constructs of nation and nationality. Langley’s later novels, set in New Zealand, follow her narrator as she comes to terms with self-imposed exile from Australia, and she is still involved with representing the local in her work. While in her Australian novels a formative aspect of being-at-home for her narrator is an association with paradigms of the frequently isolated (male) wanderer, a sense of belonging, of being in place, for Langley’s narrator in the New Zealand novels ‘being at home’ is formulated through association with the literary world.

Langley’s first two New Zealand novels follow the narrator Eve as she travels to Wanganui and works as a journalist for the *Wanganui Herald*. She says, ‘I was busy writing as usual and sending work to the *Mirror* in Auckland and getting poems in and doing work for the Herald too. In all directions I spread my literary wings after a long time of letting them rest...’ (‘Cloud’ 252). By the third New Zealand novel, Eve is living in Auckland, and has made a number of local literary connections. In particular, Langley’s unpublished novel ‘The Old Mill’ suggests a developed awareness of the critical forces surrounding the reception of Langley’s writing during those years.

‘The Old Mill,’ which contains detailed descriptions of the inner city streets of Auckland in the 1930s, describes the narrator’s attempts to emulate a bohemian artist’s life in a rickety studio garret, beyond the rules of conventional society. The narrator, Eve, identifies herself with a raft of well-known writers but particularly canonical European authors, especially modelling her lifestyle and writing style on Balzac and Maupassant in order to represent the environment in which she lives. On being lent a volume of Balzac’s writing, Eve says ‘I ...in my garret ...vowed to write exactly as [Balzac] did,’ and notes: ‘I did not care twopence for his plots, his stories, his men, his women or his loves, but ah, his furniture, his pictures, his gems, his jewels, his objects d’art!’ (186). She immediately writes a story ‘[o]ut of the life of the Indians in the old house in Upper Wellesley Street,’ a story based on the activity of the streets around her, and in the style of Balzac (228). The short story, ‘The Three Dregs,’ which is also published in the *Mirror*, is included in ‘The Old Mill.’ In ‘The Old Mill’ Langley asserts that, rather than retrogressive, literature such as that of Balzac has a valid place in the evolution of twentieth century literature: she suggests that the importance of place, and of things in place, in realist literature, provides a significant site of intersection with a literature intensely interested in the formation of a national culture through attention to the local and the specific.

Though Langley's place in the literary community of the time was minor, her glance back at the 1930s in 'The Old Mill' (written in the 1950s) suggests a developed awareness of the critical forces surrounding the layered reception of her writing during that earlier period. Langley's positioning of her narrator as an artist living in Auckland but outside Auckland society (a self-portraiture characteristic of outsider architecture) suggests a response to Glover's denigration of Langley's work as simply representative of popular taste. The desire for some form of literary and cultural agency, discernable in the positioning of Eve in 'The Old Mill,' suggests a simultaneous desire for social marginality and cultural centrality that reflects a social and cultural strategising also visible in Langley's Australian novels. By situating her narrator beyond normative social constructions but within the literary scene of New Zealand in the 1930s, Langley, I suggest, restages her own position relative to a literary scene particularly concerned with the writing of the nation.

A significant aspect to this critical positioning in both the Australian and New Zealand novels is the location of the narrator within a structure that is, or resembles, a rustic hut. In *The Pea Pickers* Steve, the narrator describes her dwelling as a 'two-roomed lean-to of inch-thick bark that smelt like seed potatoes.' She comments:

This was the sole remaining part of a gaunt milking shed that had once stood on the naked hill among the dry reeds. The grey shining rafters and uprights were visible for miles around, and the cow bails were overgrown with nettles [...] Within the hut was an empty fireplace of tin; to the right, a log seat was bound to the bark wall by thick fencing-wire. In the bedroom stood a bark table and two bark beds; there was a small window, too, with a fantastic pane of wire-netting stretched across it. (*Pea-Pickers* 115-6)

The bush hut, or rustic hut, is an archetypal representation of the space of home in Langley's novels. The structural fragility typical of the hut and its associations with both social marginality and cultural centrality are replicated in dwelling places chosen by Langley's narrator in later adventures in both Australia and New Zealand.

In New Zealand, spaces such as a hostel in Wanganui, the garret in central Auckland, a shack in Birkenhead, on Auckland's suburban North Shore, and even a boat that provides a particularly tenuous home in 'The Saunterer,' are representative of the rustic hut as depicted in Langley's early novels. When, in 'The Old Mill' Eve describes her studio flat as 'a lovely derelict old spot,' she notes, 'I had never known such gay delightful days as those I spent in the old garret under the Old Mill... such days had never been since the days of the pea pickers...' In all of Langley's novels, her narrator lives in a form of rustic hut, or expresses a strong desire to do so, in keeping with the well-worn tropes of the bush hut in Australian literature of the 1890s. Commenting on that literature, Schaffer identifies 'the bushman as the central presence who viewed his country from the inside' (39). The trope of the rustic hut is seminal to a field of ideas regarding originality and authenticity. Joseph Rykwert comments 'The primitive hut [...] has provided [...] a point of reference for all speculation on the essentials of building' (183). For architects and theorists, from Vitruvius (approx. 80-15 B.C.) to the present day, the origins of architecture have been sought in the idea of this primitive structure, which in turn has been associated with civilization's earliest stages of development. Jo Odgers argues that 'many builders and writers have sought moral or ethical authority' in structures such as the rustic hut, seeking 'possibilities for valorising simplicity; the potentially productive idea of a distant romantic origin; [...] opportunities for making authenticity claims.'

In 'The Old Mill' Eve associates the rusticity of the garret space that she inhabits with a physical freedom strongly allied with a form of artistic authenticity. In the critical context of outsider architecture, Langley's construction of the garret space is palpably a form of self-portrait. The physical nature of the studio rooms is situated within a discourse of artistic identification drawing on clichés of impoverished nineteenth century European artists starving in garrets. When Eve first views her garret she notes that its physical state is relatively unenclosed and unanchoring. It is situated at the top of a flight of stairs, off a 'slim fine boarded landing' and entered through 'a curious little thin door' (174). Eve warmly describes it as 'a lovely derelict old spot' (177). Her focus, however, is directed towards the suitability of the rooms as a writer's studio. She notes that the main room of the garret is 'so lovely... so really suited to a writer and poet's passion for solitude and quaintness and with what genius one could work here and write here' (174). She later adds, '... in this garret I'd be able to write really great books... it would soon be winter, it was now May and soon I must shift in and start to write and read and live the life of the artist writer, just as I liked to do...' (177). Standing at the window with Mr Partington, the landlord, she thinks, 'O, how glorious it was... to be young, and like a female Rembrandt set down in an old white house that stood right under a real mill' (176). For Eve, the 'life of the artist writer' in this space is one associated with otherness and distant locations, allusions that are linked with the freedom of movement she identifies with the studio space. She comments on her garret, 'With the most unique air of Paris about it all, it was precisely as though one were living 'Sur les Toits des Paris' or 'on the roofs of Paris' (174), and later notes, 'Rising in the morning in the garret as I at once called my acquisition, was unforgettable... you were in Europe, in France, Holland, anywhere but in Auckland' (182). When Mr Partington describes the other tenants of the house to her, including a woman with her small daughter and her lover, Eve 'delightedly' thinks 'Truly le atelier Paris' (175). The otherness framed by the space of the garret is not only associated with geographical dislocation; Mr Partington's reference to the unmarried status of this couple suggests there is a social dislocation associated with Eve's occupancy of her rooms. She compares her 'writer's garret' with the 'suburban "rooms", utterly rooms' that she had lived in previously, noting the 'low company' and 'low suburban [...] atmosphere' of those places (177).

Langley confirms Eve's sense that occupation of the garret will situate her as an artist dwelling amongst other artists through scenes of critical recognition and situational parallels. Eve's vision that the nature of her dwelling place furthers her construction of herself as an artist is supported when she reads 'of a group of young people in Sydney who were living in an old mill [reminiscent of Eve's dwelling] and printing and publishing their own books in remarkable printed cloth covers' (383). This is substantiated when one day Eve's sister, June, (the equivalent character is called Blue in Langley's Australian texts), leaps up the steps and into the room where Eve is sitting and presents her 'with a book from London, in which was printed a comment on [Eve's] poem "A Vision of Clouds", the editor saying that it was like the work of John Keats of long ago' (334). Further approbation from a more local source is evident when Eve unexpectedly receives a visit by Iris Wilkinson, known as the writer Robin Hyde:

A high voice came pealing through the thin door following the sound of stumbling footsteps on the stairs and the voice cried, "May I come in?" "Wait!" I rushed to the door and opened it and saw Robin Hyde standing on the small landing below the light cord...

"Aim Robin Hyde," said she [...]

“Come in,” said I. And in she came, haltingly leaning on her walking stick she used against the limp caused by a stiff knee [...] Sitting down in the chair by the window [...] she drew me into her lap and nursed me there silently for a while, as the old mill sails in the blue air of spring revolved slowly above us... We talked for a while thus, myself a small slender figure in trousers and frock over it on her matronly knee and she bowing above me, fondling my hands [...] She read my poetry and liked “The Last Sacrifice” that I had written down at Carterton best of all.... (339)

Robin Hyde, as she refers to herself in this passage, is two years younger than Eve (as consistent with Langley’s age). Eve’s description of Hyde’s stumbling footsteps and matronly knee suggests a maturity consistent, not with her age, but with Hyde’s standing as a poet and novelist. Langley frames Hyde’s visit almost as a mother visiting her child, a benediction scene with the senior writer bestowing her approval not only on Eve’s writing but also on Eve, as a writer.

Asserting Eve’s home as one situated within a literary world, Langley fills the garret and its environment with artists such as Hyde, but also imagined figures, local and international, contemporary and from the past. In addition to Robin Hyde, Eve also receives New Zealand poet Henry Brennan in her ‘artists’ garret’ and, as we shall see, on moving in to the building Eve imagines Constance Wilde as the concierge of the house. In her descriptions of the garret and Eve’s response to it, Langley locates Eve, through location and temperament, within the ebb and flow of a wide-spread artistic community. However, Eve’s identity as a writer is far from fixed. Langley’s novels consistently invoke a poetics of displacement to describe not only the unfixed nature of her narrator’s abode but also her unstable identity. Langley repeatedly suggests a polymorphous state of identity for her narrator. Within the space of home formulated by her occupation of the garret, Eve’s identity as an artist and writer exhibits constant change, flickering from one state of becoming to another. Eve practices serial enactments of a range of artist/writers, consistent with Langley’s construction of the artistic world as a free-flowing creative network.

This is notable when, as alluded to above, Eve arrives at the steps of her garret in a taxi with her ‘various goods’ and says, ‘I entered into possession after a word with a slender little well clad dark woman with waving black hair and a pleasant face, very like Constance Wilde, the wife of Oscar Wilde’ (180). Eve is taking occupancy of the rooms and control over her life as a writer, but her observation also suggests a concurrent state of being possessed. Notably, Langley describes Eve’s occupancy of her garret as a simultaneous occupancy of Eve by the imagined literary world associated with it. This reflexive occupancy, in which the garret is a space inscribed with intersecting and overlapping significations of the literary community and Eve (and Langley), is paradigmatic of outsider architecture.

Consistent with critical constructions of outsider architecture, formulations of the writer/artist through evocations of both Eve and the garret are fluid and often conflicting. Eve suggests that nineteenth century writers such as Maupassant and Balzac promote the virtues of a bohemian way of life for a serious artist, a way of life she adopts in her garret in Auckland. Even Glover, as we have seen, discusses the need for the serious writer to stand to one side of mainstream life. Yet, at all times, home in Langley’s novels is described in terms that suggest both centrality and marginality, belonging and unbelonging. In the Australian novels, Steve locates her identity within cultural frameworks central to ideas of Australian nationhood, but which assert outsidership. Her adopted name, Steve Hart is that of a bushranger, and her literary hero is Henry Lawson whose writing is full of stories of lonely lives. In the New

Zealand novels, Eve situates herself within the world of literary artists, and outside conventional society, partly as a way of cementing a position within that literary world. While those spearheading the new literary formulations of literature in New Zealand promoted public concerns over private, the enactments of home in Langley's novels suggest that, for Langley, formulations of nationhood are to be found in constructions of the home.

Both the physical manifestation of Langley's corpus of work archived in the Mitchell, and the imaginative contents of her novels represent a sustained exposition of the self as a being formed through constant negotiations between the desire of the individual and the claims of others. The peripatetic life chosen by Langley and, in turn, chosen by her narrator, the sustained insistence on a life spent living in a series of shacks, huts, hovels, suggests a turning *from* the claims of others, a retreat from the community. However, as in the constructions of outsider architecture, Langley's signal remaining interface with the society she lived alongside is through her creative work, and this body of work suggests a woman who is highly responsive to the strictures of Australian and New Zealand society in the early to mid-twentieth century, yet determined to express a strong sense of individuality. The simultaneous occupancy of writerly space by the writer, and of the writer by the greater literary community in 'The Old Mill,' flags the negotiations discernable in Langley's writing. As a form of self-portrait typical of outsider architecture, Langley's body of work speaks of both Langley and the society she was part of, and of the dominant mythologies in the writing of New Zealand at the time the novel is set; it is suggestive of the relationship between the creative individual and society, and the vulnerabilities and the strengths of that relationship.

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¹ Bibliographies of Langley's works can be found in Thwaite's biography, and at the end of Anita Segeberg's article on Langley in *JNZL*.