

“MANUFACTURED BY THE SUN”: EVE LANGLEY’S *THE PEA-PICKERS* ON THE MOVE

Nicholas Birns*
The New School
New York, NY, USA

Abstract

Eve Langley’s *The Pea-Pickers* is often seen as a quaint artifact of a now-vanished Australia. This article seeks to rescue the contemporary relevance of this novel of two young women who go into the rural areas of Gippsland to pick peas, showing its pioneering attention to transgender concerns, the polyphonic panoply of its style and soundscape, and its portrayal of a settler culture not anchored in a perilous identity but dynamically on the move. As so often in settler colony literature, though, blindneses on the issue of race—particularly the portrayal of the Muslim migrant Akbarah Khan—mar the canvas, and make Langley’s novel as emblematic of the constitutive problems of Australian literary history as of its artistic achievements. Just as Langley’s gender variance and personal nonconformity made her an outlier in the Australia and New Zealand she lived in, so is her contribution to Australian literature an unfinished project.

Keywords: Transgender; Rural Fiction; Liminality; Mobility; Modernism.

This essay will explore Eve Langley’s *The Pea Pickers* (1942) in light of its representation of ethnicity, gender and liminal cultural states. It will argue that Langley’s book excels most when its signifiers are most on the move, and fails when its positions become rigid and codified. The very liminality that is so productive in the novel, though, became problematic in Langley’s later career, partially because the external culture was far less liminal, especially with regards to the position of gender in Australian culture.

The Pea-Pickers was one of just two novels she published in her lifetime, and the other, *White Topoe* (1954) is generally far less discussed. In effect, as far as her extant, published work is concerned, she is a one-book writer, which links her not just with Australian writers who only published one significant book, not just those who published literally only one book but with those—such as Miles Franklin and Rolf Boldrewood—who *published* many books, only

one of which is really canonical. *The Pea-Pickers* is a story of two young women, Steve (the narrator), and her sister Blue, who disguise themselves as men and work, first as grape-pickers and then, even less romantically, as pea-pickers.

The alliterativeness of the phrase “pea-pickers” and the green visual imagery it generates, lends a shade of lyricism to what is, necessarily, arduous physical labor. Indeed, the stress is far more on the exuberance of the harvesting, fueled by “the great godliness of youth,” than its toil. “Our chief glory was our sweaters. Not that you need sweaters in Australia, which is a sweater itself, manufactured by the sun.”¹

Like most of the books republished in Angus and Robertson’s Australian Classics series, *The Pea-Pickers* is set in a bush, working-class ambience, and one far from the concerns of most representations of Australia today. But “working-class” can be deceptive. Langley herself was a carpenter’s daughter, but her mother

* Nicholas Birns is Associate Professor of Literary Studies at Eugene Lang College, the New School, where he teaches courses on post-1900 American and British fiction, literary theory, Shakespeare, and the history of literary genres and traditions. Nicholas Birns graduated from Columbia College in 1988, and received his Ph.D. from New York University in 1992. His email address is birnsn@newschool.edu



came from a more patrician background disinherited for marrying down. Eve Langley's mother's name was Myra; in the book, the mother's name is Mia (5), and Myra is also present as the name of a bush woman unsuccessfully courted by the narrator's uncle whom she spurns for a more conventional man, a woman who serves as a paradigm of what can go wrong in conventional marriage. As Lucy Frost revealed in her 1989 biography-by-anthology of Langley, *Wilde Eve*, Langley and her sister June actually went to Gippsland and picked peas, and Langley had a fiancé much like her beau "Macca" in the novel.²

Literary writers tend to come from just this stratum, either people who are lower class and aspirational or those who are upper class but have been by marriage, economic happenstance or lifestyle choice jettisoned from that position. Writers tend to be people who have, whether downwardly or upwardly, experienced or can glimpse at class mobility, and thus have or have had access to social privilege, but are not entirely native to or ensconced in it. Thus Langley, when she has her two young women go to Gippsland to pick peas, has them go laden with all sorts of cultural awareness: quoting Verlaine (19) and the Bible, knowing Italian opera as well as Italian migrants do, having a mock-epic exuberance that helps them make light of the often exacting physical labor they have to do but also puts it at a distance, as they know that this is a youthful experiment and that they are not bound to it for life. If not "jillaroos" in the sense that Eddie Twyborn in the middle section of Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), set at about the same time, is a jackeroo, their relation to the work they do is improvisational, performative. Yet I think especially Americans tend to go the other way, to assume that working-class is a fixed identity bound to inarticulateness and distance from intellectuality, whereas quite often in Australian literature—*Such Is Life* being a paramount example—people who are manual laborers are not only circulate but are readers and have access to cultural literacy on a large scale. In both cases, there is distance between the rural worlds of the working characters and the cosmopolitan cultural life of the cities, but also permeability. Steve and Blue are of Gippsland,

through their mother; they are peregrinators there but also reclaiming their birthright. They can be itinerant manual laborers picking peas; but they can also quote Verlaine, Keats, and *The Aeneid*.

If "working-class" is permeable in *The Pea-Pickers* so is "bush." This is, after all, Gippsland, with its soul "slow, sad, and puzzled," (20) not the outback.³ It is not only a settled, agricultural, topographically green place, but it is northeast not northwest of Melbourne, not indicative of the Great Australian Emptiness, more regional enclave than continental national self-definition. It is somewhat, in US terms, as when Sarah Orne Jewett wrote about Maine or Henry David Thoreau of Cape Cod, or, in Brazilian terms, when José de Alencar wrote about Ceará; they were writing about the country and not the city, but deliberately eschewing a mythic rhetoric of continental expansion, and of the interior as some sort of cosmic, and above all nationalist, revelation.

The temporal space of Langley's novel is also highly permeable. In a sense the Gippsland the two young women go into is that of the present, the 1930s, the Depression era, when everyone is desperate for work; in another, it is an older Gippsland, a memory of the bush of the nineteenth century. As Douglas Stewart (a great supporter of Langley) said, "the great days of the outback legend had passed by" at the time Langley's novel is ostensibly set.⁴

Moreover the space of *The Pea-Pickers* is polyphonic, in more ways than one. The book is an intense soundscape, with not only its characters breaking into song—especially after the Italian migrants Leonardo and Peppino join the fray—but even the narrative itself possessing a sonority, a concentrated lyric pulse. If its techniques are not ostentatiously experimental the way those of Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher* are, they are similarly freed from the thrall of Victorian narrative exposition. Indeed, Langley gets her characters out picking grapes in a minimum of pages, springs them into the action, swings into the pith of the book's emotions in a way that a song consummately swings us into a felt state of being. There is something in *The Pea-Pickers* also of the "spontaneous dialogue and instant narrative" that John Picker, in *Victorian Soundscapes*,

argued that the telephone introduced into dialogue, and its representation in fiction.⁵

The Pea-Pickers is polyphonic in another way: its treatment of race and ethnicity. Like the goldfields of Eureka in the 1850s, the pea fields on Gippsland in the 1930s bring people from all and sundry parts of the world: we see the Italians such as Antonino Crea—at first mistaken by the sisters for Chinese—who give license for Langley to introduce her formidable knowledge of opera into the text: indeed the text has the feel of a light opera such as *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *I Pagliacci*, somewhere between them in tone and with a darker timbre but possessing a similar sense of the concentrated joy of being in place, and of having fun even while affirming core ethical values. The operatic quality of the book very much embodies its particular style of imagery, model and realism; but it also amplifies the soundscape of the book to include words in Italian. We also see Germans, and, though indigenous Australians are not mentioned as characters, we do hear of Maori.

And the sisters' employer, the Indian farmer Karta Singh, is pictured not only positively but—and this is another thing entirely—in a position of power and oversight. There are actual Chinese as well, described as “fine looking” (55). Indeed, as a whole *The Pea-Pickers* refutes stereotypes of working-class rural Australia as monolithically white and Anglo-Celtic, first in the book's multi-track soundscape and secondly in its actual multi-ethnic cast. The book, indeed, sees the countryside, not the city, as the space of greater inclusiveness and as a place where the sisters can go to escape rigid norms of gender and meet a broader range of people on more racially equal terms than is possible in the city. Fredric Jameson comments that the “great modernisms were ... predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.”⁶ Certain writers, though, sought to take this uniqueness, and its implied criticism of bourgeois

norms, and take it to a collective—not a revolutionary, urban collective, but a rural, concrete one. We see this readily in William Faulkner, Willa Cather (especially the “Hired Girls” section of *My Ántonia*), Halldor Laxness, Wladyslaw Reymont, J. M. Synge, and Claude Simon. All are modernists in that their quirky rural characters link a distinct non-urban setting and a dissenting social position with an experimental aesthetic practice. Thus *The Pea-Pickers*, while being a novel of the rural working-class, is also a declaratively modernist one. Criticism has had difficulty seeing this in an Australian context. This is mainly because of the assumption that any working-class or rural Australian subject is deemed to bring with it a naturalistic or social-realist mode of representation.

It is thus all the more disappointing to confront the negative portrayal of Akbarah Khan—the Muslim from the Punjab—proffered by Langley. Khan's origin is carefully placed in Lahore in what is now Pakistan, although referred to as “Afghan” (74) given the latter's already-established usage as a term in the Australian bush. At first, the reader thinks Akbarah Khan is another part of the book's multicultural tableau, even made permeable with signifiers sanctioned by the Western description when the narrator described him as making the twilight “Biblical” (74). We might—especially in light of the novel's wartime publication, and the proximity to Australia of an Asian war in which the freedom of India (and Pakistan) was to be an inevitable correlate of any victory—suppose that Langley is acknowledging an incipient post-colonialism here.

But the schematic cast of the novel's emotional relationships forestalls this. Yet the tall, bearded Muslim conceives a passion for Steve, which she abhors after he makes a crude sexual advance upon discovering her female identity. “The slow-moving days brought Akbarah Khan to love me, and I hated him, for I felt to be loved by an ex-camel train driver from the East was an abasing thing” (81). Akbarah Khan is then simply expelled from the plot. To be fair, Steve herself adds the adverb “cruelly” after the moment of dialogue where she dismisses Akbarah as a “black man,” but she still says it, and she will not see him as able to be perceived outside of that identity. He argues he is a black man, but one

who owns "a train of twelve camel in West Australia"; it is still not enough, the two are "indeed enemies." (83)

I am not staying that the representation of South Asian Muslims in texts by Anglo-Australians has to be uniformly saccharine or admiring, but that the vitriol directed at him mars a tableau whose spontaneity and ebullience partially come from its heedless inclusion of a multiracial cast, and because in dismissing not just the color but the vocation and class of Akbarah Khan, Steve reneges on the presumed egalitarian spirit in which she works with her fellow harvesters and makes herself and her sister more like ingénues playing a momentary game of escape, which all the rest of the book says they are not.

It is not just that the treatment of Akbarah Khan is racist, mars the otherwise quite dynamic and inclusive multicultural panoply of the book, and reveals an uncomfortable mantle of ungenerous white privilege—even identification with doughty old England—in Steve's narrative voice. It is that it introduces an insistent discursivity into a novel that flourishes when it is most motile and canorous, that is an aria much more than it is a proposition. The novel's aesthetic strengths lie in its surrender of exposition: the way the narrative jumps us right into the bush not the narratives of the first grape pickers than pea-pickers. When the novel stops and thinks, it struggles; it flourishes while on the move. This is illustrated in the very circumstances of its writing, as this quintessentially Australian tale, so Australian that, as Frank Dalby Davison pronounced, "it has the dew on it," was in fact written in New Zealand.⁷

Langley clearly found any settled definition not only aesthetically undesirable but also epistemically evasive. She led an itinerant and largely isolated life, going between New Zealand—where in the 1930s she was actually a part of the same poetry scene as Robin Hyde—and Australia. In New Zealand, she at first eschewed the "Steve" persona and acted more conventionally feminine, marrying and having a child with a man named Hilary Clark; later on, they split up. Hilary had her committed to an asylum (not the same one where Janet Frame was) and she emerged ever more eccentric, unconventional, and, in the climate of the times, unpublishable, defying gender scripts so much, eventually going so far as, in 1954, to change

her name legally to "Oscar Wilde". (This is where the spelling of "Wilde Eve" in Frost's biography comes from). Joanne Winning, indeed, speaks of Langley's oeuvre as full of "complex dysphoric versions of sexual and gender identities."⁸ This may seem to pertain to the transgender behavior of the sisters in *The Pea-Pickers*, but for them gender crossing is much more reminiscent of Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It* than transgender masculinity in any defined sense; their femininity is easily discerned, and Blue's heterosexuality is never questioned. Marian Arkin sees the book as limited by this parody, and still remaining within a comparatively safe set of gender conventions. Yet it cannot be denied that Steve flirted with lesbianism. She wants to stay with her would-be boyfriend Macca and not return home mainly because marrying Macca would mean she could be with the wife of Macca's colleague the Beccaneer, a woman called the Black Serpent, who "loved me almost with a man's love" (313).

Rejecting Macca is not just—a la the end of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*—rejecting heterosexual fulfillment, but a kind of lesbian adjunct that would together constitute a "wild, rich, glorious life". This is spurned by Steve who remains solitary, perhaps less, as Arkin argues, out of a residual conventionality than of not wanting to accept one conclusive definition of gender identity. This can be read as a figure for Langley's own life-trajectory. In adopting the identity of Oscar Wilde—the actual name change making this very different from the demented Henry James claiming he was Napoleon, or the mad John Clare saying he was Lord Byron—she was adopting the identity of the world's most famous gay man. Moreover, "Steve" is an amplification of "Eve", and a highly macho one at that. If Oscar Wilde epitomized the decadent, gender-ambiguous Nineties of England, though, her alter ego Steve in *The Pea-Pickers* adopts the mien of the rambunctious, hyper-masculine Nineties in her *nom de guerre*; Steve is from Ned Kelly's bushranger mate Steve Hart. For Steve and her sister Blue, assuming a male identity is a mode of belonging, being accepted at work and on the land. Contrastingly, Eve Langley's self-identification with Wilde was highlighting a deliberately assumed marginal status, and a gender

transgressiveness that not even her committed friends understood. Douglas Stewart, for instance, commented of Langley dressed as a man: “I always thought she was still a woman ... I just thought it was Eve wearing something odd.”⁹

In one way, one can see this as Stewart being, as was typical of him, personally generous, liberal, and accepting of people on their own terms. In another sense, though, we can see a modern period not equipped with the gender terminology available to the twenty-first century, or, perhaps, able to articulate this gender variation tacitly but not yet explicitly. This is indicative of the many ways in which postmodernism or post-structuralism was in many ways the formal articulation, in discursive, expository prose, of the assumptions about multiplicity, identity, and language that modern literature, including—despite that literature’s reputation for realism—modern Australian literature had long assumed.

With today’s focus on transgender issues, one could refer here to Judith Butler’s “gender performativity” or the early Jack Halberstam’s “female masculinity¹⁰”. Langley did not identify straightforwardly as a transgender male. But there is a very real sense of masculinity in her work; as what was at first an unconventional, perhaps even (from the heteronormative perspective) roguishly ingratiating approach to femininity began to question the very aptness of femininity itself for Langley’s identity. Although Langley cannot be classified determinedly as masculine, to simply resort to ideas of gender performativity or fluidity in her work without noting the explicitly transgender valence that applies to them would be reductive. To see Langley’s identity as beyond the performative is the obverse of recognizing that work and the life have connections, but not seamless or transparent ones. But the way that Langley crossed gender boundaries in her life should illuminate how radical was the gender transgressiveness in her work. We are still used—after generations of interrogating modernism—to stylistic experimentation in the mode of Virginia Woolf that comes out, in a plausibly teleological way, out of the psychological novel, but less to stylistic experimentation that comes out of the *social* novel, especially given the Left’s own dichotomies

that saw what Patricia Laurence called emphasis on “inner life and feeling” as inherently apolitical.¹¹ This is especially true when the social novel is Australian, politically radical, and comes out of the 1930s, a decade that, as the work of Cary Nelson and Alan Wald with respect to North America has suggested is still marginalized in literary history.¹² In other words, turf wars with respect to modernism, style and politics, as well as the still-peripheral status of modern Australia, have, along with the author’s own idiosyncrasies, conspired to keep Langley off the literary map.

Langley’s gender transgression was not just a feature of her personal life, but more capaciously, is an aspect of her situation in literary history. Maryanne Dever has indeed warned against sensationalizing Langley’s oeuvre, and her life can all too easily overshadow her work.¹³ Yet Langley epitomized liminality; she careered between male and female, gay and straight, fiction and poetry, Australia and New Zealand, being published and being unpublished, the sociality and garrulousness of her fiction and the loneliness and isolation of the last decade of her life, the English in which she wrote and the frequent scraps of foreign poems, songs, and signifiers that infiltrated her discourse. In *The Pea-Pickers* these pluralities are harmonized. It is tragic that in Langley’s own life they were not. But this was just as likely a product of society’s unwillingness to accept her unconventionality as in any inherent flaw of her own.

Though her work received a certain fillip in the era of second-wave feminism, even then Marian Arkin called *The Pea-Pickers* a “neglected classic.”¹⁴ Langley is still somewhat neglected, and it is symptomatic that *The Pea-Pickers* has been brought out in the more archival Angus and Robertson classics series than the flashier Text Classics. It is curious that, although Australian literature is global today, and although global Victorianist scholars have afforded nineteenth-century Australian writing a certain presence in the global, this global stature seems unavailable to Australian literature of the early- to mid-twentieth century, still perhaps bound by stereotype of what “modernism” is or can be. Susan Stanford Friedman’s idea of “multiple modernisms” has given theoretical permissions for other sorts of twentieth-century imaginative products to infuse the

canon, but in practice Australian writers of Langley's period, especially those who are not expatriates, seem still to be stuck in a kind of dormant limbo.¹⁵ This is despite all the relevancies—in terms of gender identity, referential mobility, and stylistic polyphony—she offers to twenty-first century concerns.

There is thus a need to read Langley, and to demonstrate her worth. As Kate Makowiecka pointed out, there is a large amount of unpublished material.¹⁶ This material is accessible to researchers and has even been edited by scholars such as Anita Segerberg and Lucy Frost. But Langley's descendants have refused the publication of this work. Thus what Frost calls "textual Eve" is still only half-unearthed.¹⁷ Given the growing visibility of transgender identities, and the acceptance of gender fluidity in society, Langley's posthumously published material will fully arrive in a twenty-first century that is more prepared for her than the era of her lifetime. This archival material is divided between works much like *The Pea-Pickers*—lyrical, polyphonic, and set in Australia—and more factual diaristic works set in New Zealand, again instancing how Langley's divisions across the Tasman are also divisions of genre (between fiction and poetry) or mode (between lyrical creative fantasy and a more documentary empiricism). Ultimately, this work will be published and will be available, so Langley's oeuvre has an odd sense of being still pending, with archival discoveries not just rumored but definite, coming into view with the surety of a planetary orbit given copyright expiration and the inevitable passing of generations. With this coming harvest in mind, we should begin to prepare by disinterring *The Pea-Pickers* from its neglect as simply a novel of its time and place and scrutinize the real challenge it offers to accustomed ideas of Australia, and, even more urgently, its robust operatic kick as a work of fiction on the move.

Notes

1. Eve Langley, *The Pea-Pickers*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1966) p. 10. All additional citations will be incorporated into the text.
2. Lucy Frost, *Wilde Eve: The Life and Writings of Eve Langley* (Sydney: Heinemann, 1999).
3. Patrick Morgan, *Shadow and Shine: an Anthology of Gippsland Literature*, Churchill: Centre for Gippsland Studies 1988, Gives a good sense of Gippsland's difference from the more conventional Australian representation of the bush.
4. Douglas Stewart, *The Broad Stream, Essays on Australian Literature*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p. 178.
5. John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
6. Fredric R. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso, 2009, p. 6.
7. Marian Arkin, "Literary Transvestism in Eve Langley's 'The Pea-Pickers'". *Modern Fiction Studies* 27.1 (Spring 1981): 109.
8. Joanne Winning, "Wilde Identifications: Queering the Sexual and the National in the Work of Eve Langley," in *Australian Literary Studies*; October 2002, 20.4: 301.
9. Meg Stewart, "The Shadows Are Different; An Appreciation of Eve Langley," ABC radio broadcast, 1977.
10. Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997; Halberstam, Jack, "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity." in *The Lesbian Postmodern*. Edited by Laura Doan. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. pp. 210–228.
11. Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2003, p. 67.
12. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989; Alan Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade..* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007.
13. Maryanne Dever, "Papered Over: Or, Some observations on Materiality and Archival Method." In Amy L. Stone and Janet Cantrell, Ed. *Out of the Closet into The Archive: Researching Sexual Histories*. New York: SUNY, 2015, pp. 65-98.
14. Arkin, op. cit, p. 109.
15. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies." *Modernism/Modernity* 13:3, September 2006. 432.
16. Kate Makowiecka, "'One long tumultuous inky shout': Eve Langley." *Antipodes*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Dec 2002: 181-182
17. Frost, op. cit.

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