

Archive of Desire: The Souvenir in Eve Langley's Australian Novels

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"Fidelity lies in accumulating things – which appear, mostly in the form of fragments or ruins" (Susan Sontag).

In Eve Langley's unpublished manuscript, 'Wild Australia', which chronologically follows her second novel, *White Topee*, Langley's female narrator returns to the alps for work in the hop fields.¹ Anticipating the end of one hop-picking season, Steve and her sister Blue wander down to the field where some workers' tents are erected, and discuss the potential for salvageable items once the workers have moved on and the tent sites have been abandoned:

'Good lot of tents over there, Steve,' said Blue.
'Too right. We'll go through them when the pickings over, Blue.'
'Sometimes you wonder why they leave such a lot of lids around, don't you?'
'Meat tins, too.'
'And the grand impression that their bunks have made on the grander and more lovely earth.'
'Wish they'd leave the blankets instead of the grand impression.'
'A tent that's been pulled up is a marvellous thing, I reckon, Steve.'
'To me the space that's left is glorious [...] I could dream out his life, that owned the tent, the shadow where the bunk lay, the tea tree under the mattress ...' (248-9)

In this typically comedic exchange between Steve and Blue, Steve's 'dream[ing] out' of the life evoked by the trace of the tent resonates beyond the humour of the passage. Physical traces of previous activity pattern Langley's novels: at one stage her protagonist comments that 'over the clean floor, sometimes muddy boots trod and left dark healthy marks' ('Bancroft House' 205), and at another time she notes the mark in the grass left by her brother-in-law, seeing it as a 'huge spread pattern [...] like a large horse lying there' ('Dublin Street' 369). Langley's narrator often accords these traces a positive and vivid presence. Always incomplete, the trace suggests both an antecedent and subsequent context of events or description. The backwards glance suggested by the trace or fragment evokes a creative impulse in which the observer is drawn to imaginatively reform the whole suggested by it. As Steve says, by looking at the traces left by the pulled up tent, she 'could dream out his life, that owned the tent'.

In this essay, I focus on a pattern of traces of activity expressive of other places and times in the six novels that Langley sets in Australia: her two published novels and her first four unpublished manuscripts.² These novels, which chronologically follow each other, will be treated here as one continuous narrative. Throughout Langley's Australian novels, her narrator Steve travels widely through the countryside of

Victoria as an itinerant field hand and self-styled rover, but she regularly returns to her mother's house. On these visits home she invariably brings with her evidence of her adventures and it is the nature and employment of these souvenirs that I explore here. The souvenirs brought back to Mia's house by her daughter, Steve, articulate a way of life that is situated beyond the social and physical space of the house. However, the souvenir also speaks of where it is and the person who owns it. While it embodies previous activity, at the same time it also speaks of the present. In this article I will consider the placement of the souvenirs in Mia's home as an intersection of the domestic space with that which articulates a refusal of the domestic. However, as my examination of the souvenir in Langley's novels moves from the study of the souvenir as an individual artefact to an interrogation of that artefact when it is presented as part of a collection, the 'refusal' of the domestic by the souvenir is seen to be complicated, and even undermined. Consideration of the souvenirs as a collection will illuminate the performativity of the placement of the souvenirs within Mia's home and in so doing will unsettle the representation of 'home' and 'away' as oppositional positions. Following this, the connectedness of the spaces of home, community and nation in Langley's novels will be evaluated. The examination of objects (the souvenir) in space (the home) is facilitated by viewing Langley's texts through two theoretical prisms. Susan Stewart's discussion of the nature of the souvenir provides a useful guide to understanding the employment of the souvenir in Langley's novels, and Henri Lefebvre's articulation of social space illuminates the social forces at work in concepts such as 'home' and 'away'.

In *On Longing* Stewart examines the relationship between 'narrative and its objects' and suggests that in this relationship narrative presents 'a structure of desire' (ix). Regarding the souvenir, Stewart argues:

The souvenir is by definition always incomplete. And this incompleteness works on two levels. First, the object is metonymic to the scene of its original appropriation in the sense that it is a sample.... Second, the souvenir must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse, a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire. (136)

My suggestion in this essay, regarding the souvenirs brought by Steve back to her mother's house, is that while the narrative discourse of the souvenir articulates imaginative constructs based on the souvenirs' original contexts, it also articulates the play of desire regarding the space in which the souvenirs ultimately reside. That is, the souvenirs archive Steve's day-to-day life away from her mother's house, but in doing so, as distancing devices, they assert a reconfiguration of the social space of that house.

In order to fully comprehend the interwoven patterns of here and there, or home and 'away', framed by the souvenir in Langley's novels, it is necessary to scrutinise the delineations of the space in which they reside. The division of social space into three categories, suggested by Lefebvre, offers a useful framework for reading the social forces at work in Mia's home. 'Spatial practice' concerns specific places and describes the act of getting from one place to another. 'Representations of space', or 'conceptualised space', are expressive of social regulation; in this concept of space a culture's social power and authority are made visible and reinforced. These spatial manifestations of social power may be banks, city squares, memorials: the 'space of

planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' (38-9). 'Representational' space 'overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects', it is 'space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users," but also of some artists . . . (original italics; 39). 'Representational' space is frequently imagined in opposition to other forms of social space. In the case of Mia's home, the spatial practice, expressed in terms of the blurred boundaries of a tumble-down suburban house, is at odds with social representations of the suburban home as prescriptive of rigid gender construction and location. At the same time, the objects that Steve carries back to her mother's home bring the representational space of 'away' into direct conflict with the representation of social power posited by the house, opening up the possibilities of resistance to the social constructs of the house and its defining urban and suburban location.

Each of the novels that Langley sets in Australia contains a description of at least one of Steve's visits back to her mother Mia. It is from Mia's house that Steve leaves on her first journey into Gippsland with Blue at the beginning of *The Pea-Pickers*. At the end of each adventure Steve returns to this house to be with her mother and to discuss her movements beyond the house through the wider world. In so doing, she reinforces the conventional dichotomy of home and away in which 'home' provides interiority, enclosure and regulation, and 'away' signifies physical and social openness and freedom from restraint. This oppositional relationship is not presented as static; it shifts and changes, becoming more apparent through the span of Langley's Australian novels. A consistent feature of Langley's novels is the exploration of home as a place of instability and unsettledness, frequently manifested in the fragile material nature of those dwellings in which Langley's narrator feels at-home. The bark huts that Steve seeks to inhabit during her years working in the fields of Gippsland barely shelter her from the weather, and symbolise an unfettered life. When their friend Jim proposes that Steve and her sister board locally in Metung, they protest, 'We want to live like bushmen and pea-pickers, in old huts. Freedom... freedom, James, my boy!' (*Pea-Pickers* 69). In 'Bancroft House', when offered the use of the titular mansion, Steve responds, 'A hut would have been better, more romantic in a fashion. True remittance stuff' (122). Steve frames those spaces imagined as by her as home as lacking physical and social containment. This framing is evident in her descriptions of the house in Dandenong during the time in which she lives there, before she embarks on her adventures in Gippsland.

In the opening pages of *The Pea-Pickers*, the house is not referred to as Mia's home, as it is in later novels, but is called 'our house' by Steve (2). As her home, the precarious nature of its built structure is emphasised. The separation between the inside of this house and outside is tenuous. In *The Pea-Pickers* Steve says that from the street Mia's disintegrating house 'looked like a pile of rotten chips' (2). In the kitchen 'the red and white flags [of the floor] rocked in their beds' (*Pea-Pickers* 279). Ivy grows through the walls and as the giant plum trees around the house draw the goodness out of the dark soil, the house seems to settle further down into it, continuous with the landscape rather than separate from it. The house is described as part of the ebb and flow of nature, with a natural lifecycle associated with the lifespan of untreated timber construction.

At this stage the house in Dandenong is not depicted as separate to a life of wandering and freedom, but part of an ongoing adventure. Mia, who had lost her family home through her youthful desire for adventure and romance, and who 'looked like an old bushman herself' seems as unsettled as her daughters and propels them out into the wider world (*Pea-Pickers* 5). Steve says:

Mia had encouraged us to wander; made restless by long hard years of gipsying [sic] through the Australian States, she found peace in urging us out to follow the echo of the aboriginal names of towns that had tempted her when she was young... For years she had been saying, 'You girls would love Gippsland... the Monaro... the Stream... the Tambo and the Lakes.' For years she had laid the powder trail [...] that would set us alight. (*Pea-Pickers* 4-5)

Mia is associated with the house in its run-down state and, with her daughters, participates in the family's practice of 'harmless deceits against the town's health inspector, whereby, with many variegated roses, lilacs, ivies and grapevines, [they] concealed from his unkindly eye the fact that [the family's] "kipsie", as Mia called it, was falling down' (2). Significantly, the efforts of the family to maintain their home in its decayed state not only identify it further with its natural environment in the form of the flowers and vines encouraged to smother it, but also, to use Lefebvre's formulation, assert it as a space resistant to social regulation such as that enforced by the local health department and so, expressive of the representational space of 'away', or 'beyond'.

However, as Steve and her sister Blue follow Mia's 'powder trail' to Gippsland and find work and adventure there, the family home becomes simply termed 'Mia's home' and, while Steve's descriptions of the house still acknowledge the insubstantiality of its structure, her representations of it as a cultural space reposition the house within the force fields of 'social power and authority' (Lefebvre 38). Situated within the house, Mia becomes identified with its traditional cultural representations of domesticity, and the sisters come to signify life outside that domesticity, so that their visits to their mother describe a disturbance of a culturally prescribed domestic space. Arriving home from one adventure, Steve observes:

Mia was bewildered by our sudden arrival and the way we thrust our imaginary whiskers through the window and announced, 'We're home, little woman... whataboutacuppatea?' [...] We put on beards and moustaches of black rabbit-skin and performed before her until morning, acting the parts of all the those we had met. (*Pea-Pickers* 60)

A living souvenir, Steve is projected as representative of all the characters encountered in her time away. The breadth of the experience she encapsulates, which takes all night to re-enact, is reinforced by contrast with the parodically named 'little woman' who is bewildered at the sudden appearance of her daughters. At this time, Steve clearly differentiates herself from her mother through her assumed manliness and larger than life confidence in performance. By appearing unannounced, and arriving at the window rather than the door, Steve asserts a lack of domestic regulation; this lack is a condition she associates with the countryside she has been occupying, and which she, in turn, wishes to be associated with.

Despite the physically blurred boundaries of the house, when Steve stays in Mia's home in between adventures and jobs her impression is one of undesirable containment. She says, 'The gate of home admitted us to that small untidy garden which was to be our world for a few weeks; and the sudden cramping, after huge ranges, long valleys and wild rivers, was like a physical stricture to us' (*Pea-Pickers* 279). The restrictions of domestic life in a suburban family home are compared with Steve's life away in terms of size, relative distance, openness, and implied freedom. Though she loves her mother and speaks of her warmly, Steve does not feel at home in the containment represented by Mia's house. This containment is multifaceted. In *White Topee*, during another visit, Steve comments:

Mia and I settled in for a fortnight or two of winter, after that first afternoon. I took much persuading to remain at home. Dandenong always appeared contracted to my eyes, used to the miles and miles of Gippsland. I walked around the Lodge and eyed the laurels gloomily. I could not understand how my mother could be bothered living in such a place. Motor cars were passing it every minute; clerks and shop girls went by to their work down in the main street. And next door one could hear the servant saying to her old mistress, 'The figs will soon be ripe, ma'am'. (60)

The brief length of time allocated for the visit – a 'fortnight or two' – is indicative of the sense of discomfort Steve feels in encountering the bustle of life on the city streets, and the domestic life expected of young women in the suburbs. In contrast, she later says:

I loved to ride and wander forever, to come home to my mother with my annual collection of bandicoot skins, lowry feathers, kangaroo hides, porcupine bristles, rifles, powderflasks, old bridles, ancient books, old drawings and copies of old, old Italian songs. ('Bancroft House' 98)

In the disparity between the two or so weeks allocated for Steve's visit to her mother, and the time between the annual visits, we see co-ordinates of the life in which Steve feels at-home. Steve's souvenirs represent her life away from the house as rich and wide-ranging, involving physical and mental extension. The range of animal skins, feathers and bristles implies a life engaged with the countryside rather than the city and suburbs of her mother's home, and the books, drawings and songs imply an intellectual life rich in comparison to that of an office worker or domestic servant.

Bill Brown suggests we feel encouraged to look through objects for the stories beyond, and souvenirs are a particularly potent class of objects; they speak not just of where they have come from, but also of where they are. Susan Stewart argues:

The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity. (139)

For Steve, authenticity is sought in an itinerant life in a rural environment and through identification with character-types like the old 'bushmen' of Mia's stories. Steve

describes the souvenirs brought back to Mia's house on a visit described in *The Pea-Pickers*:

Opening up our packing-case, we brought out our trophies and nailed them to the wall with those from Metung. Beside the six-foot snake-skin, a gift from Jim, was the ticket off the bag into which Macca tipped peas and beans. Above these we set the four guns I had found in the alpine district; the racing bit, a purple and gold jockey's cap, and a beautiful brown hat of Italian felt which Major had given to Blue. (279)

Like those described in the earlier excerpt, these souvenirs speak largely of Steve's life in the outdoors, of adventure and physical freedom. As souvenirs, these objects represent, not the lives or experiences of the makers or even of the objects in their original locations but, as Stewart puts it, 'the "secondhand" experience of its possessor/owner' (135). Yet, as noted, the souvenir has a double function: while the narrative associated with each souvenir is focussed on an experience of life between visits to Mia, it also speaks of the house in which it is displayed. The space of 'away' symbolised by the souvenirs interacts with and unsettles the socially constructed space of the house, potentially opening up the closed space of culturally prescribed domestic life. The six-foot long snakeskin is a reminder, not so much of the snake in its habitat, or even, Jim as represented by his kind gift, but of the relationship Steve and Blue have with Jim, which is one of mateship as though they are three male friends. The ticket from the crop bag talks not only of the bag, or of the peas and beans loaded into it, but of the working lives of the sisters in the fields of Gippsland, and of Steve's passion for Macca. In the display of the ticket Steve is expressing her predilection for drawn out, melancholic and ultimately unfulfilled romance, modelled on a perceived Romantic ideal of love encouraged by her reading of poetry. The guns and racing gear represent the masculine model of life adopted by the sisters on their adventures, and the Italian hat speaks of the crossing of ethnocentric boundaries in a time spent mixing with new immigrants in the fields and huts of the horticultural world. Later, on the night of the sisters' arrival at their mother's house, Blue grabs the hat back off the wall: "'See, Mia? Maggiore gave this to me!' "Ah", said Mia fearfully, "those Italians will be the cause of your death yet, you girls. Keep away from them!"' (280). Mia is referring to the social death feared from miscegenation, particularly during the time of the white Australia policy. The socialising with the Italian men that the girls work alongside, the living and working as men in a male-dominated rural culture, and the life spent mainly outside all contrast with the life represented by houses like Mia's, in Australia in the early twentieth century, within which a constrained domestic life is prescribed. Contesting social prescriptions of 1920s Australian life, the souvenirs speak of a life not only outside spatially, but also outside socially.

However, the notable evocation of distance in the souvenir, whether it is geographical or social, is reformulated when the souvenirs are grouped into and presented as part of a collection. Whereas the souvenir is a synecdochic device, in that it is a sample of its original whole, the collection 'offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy' (Stewart 151). The grouping of the souvenirs suggests a narrative that adds to those of the individual objects. In the collection, historical aspect is transformed into space; the space is not that signified in the distance evoked by the souvenir, but that of the narrative of the collection itself (Stewart xii). The souvenirs

of Steve's time away are placed carefully on the walls of her mother's house. She comments,

Mia had placed all our treasures in the right places. On brackets on the walls were my seven rifles and two Service revolvers. There were foxes' skins, wallabies' skins, the skins of eagles and snakes, bandicoots and lizards, jockeys' caps, racing bridles, saddles, powder flasks, bullet and cartridge belts, two battle boomerangs and half a dozen exhibition boomerangs. (*White Topoe* 60)

Steve explains the layout of each display in some detail: they are deliberately arranged collections. Stewart says: '[t]o ask which principles of organisation are used in articulating the collection is to begin to discern what the collection is about' (152). It is significant that when Steve unpacks her souvenirs from the packing case they have been brought in, she calls them trophies. The arrangements within the displays of souvenirs as described by Steve, have parallels with the arrangements of hunting trophies presented in photographs in hunting and game fishing magazines. In an oppositional construction, the hunting narrative suggested by the souvenirs when viewed as a collection or collections both furthers and contradicts that of the individual souvenir. As Stewart notes, '[b]ecause they are souvenirs of death, the relic, the hunting trophy, and the scalp are at the same time the most intensely *potential* souvenirs and the most potent antisouvenirs (original italics; 140). However, while Stewart views souvenirs such as the hunting trophy as marking 'the transformation of meaning into materiality' (140), here the hunting trophy will also be considered as marking the transformation of one narrative into another.

Analysis of photographs in hunting magazines shows that a common device in the exhibition of animal trophies is the positioning of weapons and other hunting equipment over or above or in front of the animal body (Kalof and Fitzgerald). In the displays of Steve's souvenirs, her assemblage of guns is prominently placed relative to the animal skins, feathers, bristles and hides on display. Kalof and Fitzgerald suggest that the prominence of the weapons in the displays photographed for the hunting magazine is staged in order to represent the activity of the hunt and the kill. Often there is no human in the photographs of trophy displays, suggesting that the weapons also stand in for the people who had held and employed them in the hunt. In the displays on Mia's walls, the guns figure the animal remains as hunting trophies and the owner of the guns, Steve, as a hunter. The guns represent their owner as being at home in the 'armed confrontation between humanness and wildness, between culture and nature' that is the hunt (Cartmill 30). The trophy displays in Mia's house construct a narrative about hunting and killing Australian native fauna that reconfigures the narrative represented in the individual souvenirs. The hunting narrative presented in the collection of souvenirs shifts the rhetoric of the object from one of intimacy with nature to one of mastery over nature. In this construction, to use Lefebvre's concepts, rather than speaking of the 'representational' space of 'away', and 'outside society', the souvenirs are representative of forms of social and cultural power conventionally assigned to the domestic and urban space. Rather than signifying integration with the natural world, the trophies indicate a separation from it that parallels that of urban society, and suggest an extreme form of regulation of the natural environment.

The complex intertwining of narratives represented by the souvenirs is further complicated by the probable state of disrepair of the guns in the collections of Steve's trophies. Langley never directly describes Steve firing a gun, and throughout her novels most of the guns handled by Steve are depicted as broken and abandoned by their previous owners. In *The Pea-Pickers* Steve says:

I was beginning to collect guns of all sorts. The rusty Martini-Henry [...] was the first I had picked up. I developed a passion for them, and sought them everywhere. Beyond the river, in a house deserted by the Sullivans, I found two old rifles, together with a quaint broken teapot and old romantic dance programmes. (228)

Later, on hearing Steve speak of her "passion for guns" her friend, the 'Buccaneer' is 'moved [to] go under the house and bring out an old kangaroo gun that he had flung out of sight years ago. Sitting by the fire, [Steve] cleaned it up and oiled it' (*Pea-Pickers* 286). It is implied that the guns brought back to Mia's house as souvenirs are all acquired in this way, and the association of the guns with the broken teapot and other debris found in an abandoned house suggest that they are, in their original sense, functionally deficient. The guns brought to Mia's house by Steve are symbols of an aspect of Steve's life as a wanderer, in which she imagines herself living self-sufficiently in solitude, yet, like the fake swagger and false beards, the state of disrepair of most of the guns means that they are souvenirs of Steve's *desire for* a way of life as much as souvenirs *of* the way of life itself.

The staging of Steve's visits back to her mother, and the particular placement of the souvenirs on the walls of her mother's house, offers various constructions of the lines of desire archived in those souvenirs. The broken guns and the 'rabbit-skin' masculinity of Langley's narrator suggest not only a playful indulgence in artifice, but also illuminate the performativity of the employment of souvenirs in Langley's novels. This in turn raises questions about the 'constructedness' of concepts such as 'home' and 'away'. Lefebvre makes the point that from the point of view of those subjects whose practices realise social space 'the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions; then they perish, and that same space contains their graves' (34). Yet, most significantly for this essay, Lefebvre also argues that 'social space works [...] as a tool for the analysis of society' (34). Examination of the social spaces of 'home' and 'away' in Langley's novels reveals the artifice in the representation of these spaces as oppositional.

Steve's desire for a life romantically based on that of the 'noble' Australian bushman appears to position her outside norms conventionally ascribed to the home. Yet, the souvenirs she brings to her mother's home unsettles that position. Stewart argues that the souvenir 'may be seen as emblematic of the nostalgia that all narrative reveals--the longing for its place of origin' (xii). She suggests that 'particularly important' are 'the functions of the narrative of the self: that story's lost point of identity with the mother and its perpetual desire for reunion and incorporation' (xii). This narrative finds expression in the cycle of departure and return reiterated in the adventures undertaken by Steve and Blue. While the trophies that are returned to the mother, Mia, represent a contestation of her domestic space, Mia's identification with the old bushmen who lived 'back in the airly days'(sic) suggests that the assertion of

fragments of bush life within the space of her home represents both reunion and a critical incorporation of ‘home’ with ‘away’ (5). As Stewart notes, the souvenir ‘contracts the world in order to expand the personal’ (xii).

Implied in Stewart’s statement is the suggestion that the ‘self’ and the ‘world’ are overlapping critical fields; and home, community, and nation are all intertwined in the deployment of the souvenir in Langley’s novels. Blue claims that the journey that the sisters are about to embark on in the beginning of *The Pea-Pickers* is one that takes them ‘into a district that’s a mixture of Mia and Henry Lawson’ (9). Figures central to Australian national literature, such as Lawson, depict the bush, and bush-dwellers, as pivotal to any discussion about Australian national identity. Steve’s souvenirs represent a space closely identified with contemporary Australian formulations of national identity at the same time as the desires signified by them oppose social norms of the time. While the depiction of Mia as a pseudo bushman stages the nation within the home, the performative nature of the souvenirs of Steve’s life as an itinerant worker contests the constructions of national identity built around the Australian bushman/rover type that Mia is identified with and that Steve strives to emulate. Ideas of freedom and independence celebrated in the souvenirs and associated with the project of Australian nationhood are asserted in Langley’s texts, but the contested nature of both home and nation unsettles these assertions at the same time as they are made.

NOTES

¹ There are three versions of ‘Wild Australia’. The first contains an extensive development of the episode described in *White Topee*, in which Steve is portrayed as a reincarnation of Oscar Wilde. The second and third versions are written by Langley in response to her publisher’s concerns regarding the Oscar Wilde material. These versions have the Wilde material excised, and are identical except for typographical differences. The version referred to in this essay is the second one.

² Langley’s two published novels are *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee*. Her four unpublished novel manuscripts (set in Australia) are, in chronological order: ‘Wild Australia’ (Oscar Wilde) and ‘Wild Australia’ (Wilde excised), ‘The Victorians’, and ‘Bancroft House’.

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