

## SOCIETY

# Who's Afraid of Marcia Langton?

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Two very unlike people have been opening up new ways of thinking about Indigenous affairs in Australia during the past several years. Noel Pearson, the known face of the new thinking, is someone settler institutions can relate to. He is male. He belongs by origin and choice to a remote Australia – the Cape York Peninsula – most white people have never seen. He has had a rigorous Christian schooling, in his case Lutheran. Pearson is young enough to be distinct in his personal history from some extreme and bitter phases of Indigenous struggle, and this helps his arguments gain a hearing. He is a lawyer deeply versed in English common law, and a powerful exponent of its principles and precedents.

Marcia Langton has a longer and more various history than Pearson, and is a lot harder to place. She is 14 years older, a grandmother several times over, and she will turn 60 this year. She describes herself as “now an academic and writer” – which is not so much wrong as desperately inadequate. She has a PhD in anthropology from Macquarie University and for over a decade has been the first occupant of the University of Melbourne’s Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies. But Langton seems no less fired up today than she was when I first met her nearly 40 years ago when, after several years overseas, she came roaring back into Australia at the start of 1975, unknown and unnoticed and determined to change things.

She has pursued an academic career over many years but only when she has had time for it. Her PhD thesis, a study of eastern Cape York society, was finished only in 2005 after being sidelined again and again by Langton's many other interests and her more urgent tasks. By now she has built up a formidable paper résumé. Whether or not this was planned – it seems unlikely – the university curriculum flowed into her Indigenous advocacy and strengthened her voice. The academy has lent its enabling weight and prestige to her work on the ground.

After completing an honours degree in anthropology at ANU in 1984, Langton worked on matters of land claims for the Central Land Council in Alice Springs and the Cape York Land Council in northern Queensland. She even worked, for a short unhappy time, for the Queensland Labor government of Wayne Goss. It was on the Cape York Land Council that she first met Pearson in the early '90s. Her most original contribution in these first years of institutional activism – before her arduous negotiating work toward the *Native Title Act 1993* – was made in 1989 on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. She wrote a submission called 'Too Much Sorry Business', which related the enormously high number of Aboriginal men who died in jail or under police guard in the Northern Territory to Indigenous mortality rates, and to heavy use of alcohol and other drugs. It announced Langton's disabused view of the quality of life in Indigenous communities.

It was an early harbinger of her immediate support for the Howard government's intervention in Territory communities, announced just ahead of the federal election in 2007. For many, Langton's support for a right-wing government's radical move into Indigenous affairs was almost as shocking as the intervention itself. So was the coincidence of Langton's long-held and vigorously expressed views with Pearson's evolving thought on the need for Indigenous responsibility and the crisis of welfarism in Indigenous affairs. Two of Indigenous Australia's most significant thinkers became, for many on the Left, a pair of worrisome troublemakers almost overnight.

The confluence was described the following year by Nicolas Rothwell in the *Australian Literary Review*. He called Langton's recent writings "majestic". They are too, but they also have a fabulously demotic flair, cultivated and street-smart, as Langton always is when not letting herself be shoehorned into academic formats. Her very titles are incomparable. My favourites are 'Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television ...' and 'Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show', as well as the more savage 'Too Much Sorry Business'. Others are 'Rum, Seduction and Death', 'The Valley of the Dolls' and 'Dumb Politics Wins the Day'. Langton has a way of making you want to read about things you never thought you'd ever want to read about.

She floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee and she terrifies people who have to face her in debate. Especially politicians. She can shift from *ex cathedra* to street-fighter mode in the blink of an eye. A couple of years ago Langton tangled with Germaine Greer, who was banging on about the racism she imputed to Baz Luhrmann's outback movie, *Australia*. Langton pounced on what she called Greer's "cleverly disguised contempt for Aboriginal people, her desperate need to stereotype Aboriginal victimhood". It went viral and Langton convinced people, she insists, that Greer was herself being racist. Langton persuaded few to see the film, whose true and careful picture of Indigenous society she valued and whose epic schlock she loved. She knew about the world it depicted from her grandmother, Ruby, who had told young Langton of her labour in the big pastoral homesteads.

Yet Langton is most formidable live. The same month Rothwell acclaimed her writings, she got low down and deeply courteous on the matter of the Howard intervention with the Northern Territory's former Labor Chief Minister Clare Martin, under the startled button eyes of an inclusively friendly Anglican archbishop. The women were dressed – as for a night raid into enemy territory – in variant charcoal safari suits, and the archbishop's purple silk shirt-front shrieked at them like a mating cry.

Langton was even scarier silent than in speech, a glowering matriarch, stony and immobile above a rapidly jiggling booted foot, surveying the auditorium through the hooded eyes of a predator bird. A report on the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse had been presented to Martin's government months before the federal intervention. It was never circulated. Langton murmured with perfect audibility at Martin, "I think you said you couldn't find a printer." Moments like this come with startling rapidity when she speaks to the things she cares about most.

Martin sat rigid and smiled seraphically at the far corner of the conference centre ceiling whenever Langton spoke. When answering, she flapped her outstretched arms for lift-off. "There are some [Indigenous] communities right around Australia that work wonderfully. You've got extraordinary people in those communities. They work harder than we would dream of, they're involved in so many aspects of the community, they hold down full-time jobs, they care for their kids well ... and I'm in awe of them." Langton sucked her teeth, jiggled her foot some more, stared into the auditorium and won the session's one burst of spontaneous applause when she evoked the wasted lives of teenage petrol sniffers.

Langton has been thinking about the constitutional status of Indigenous Australians for even longer than she has about the life crisis in remote communities. She wants the remaining vestiges of race power wiped from the Constitution. She has been talking for 40 years about racism in Australia. Her life pivots on this word. She grew up politically in the late '60s and has matured but never abandoned the language and style of her youthful anger. If Pearson has no baggage from that time, Langton carries hers with pride.

She and Pearson are members of the group set up by the prime minister to work out how Indigenous Australians should be recognised in the country's Constitution. Lowitja O'Donoghue, though not a formal member of this group, is a great and still active leader from an earlier time. O'Donoghue is 19 years older than Langton and 33 older than Pearson but the three have made, with varying emphases, common cause on the Australian Constitution.

The question is what Indigenous people want; another is what white Australians will accept. Pearson and Langton both insist on a referendum among Indigenous people on how the Constitution should change, so that their own inclusive and concrete proposals are manifestly shared and not open to challenge later by people who might be satisfied with a pro forma nod in the preamble, or by radical separatists.

In October 1999 Langton was one of five Indigenous leaders who were granted an audience with the Queen in Buckingham Palace to discuss the UK's unfinished business with Australia's first inhabitants and their proposed recognition in the Australian Constitution. They were the first to penetrate the palace since Bennelong had entered as diplomat and trophy a little over 200 years before. Patrick Dodson presented the Queen with a photo of his grandfather's meeting with her on the back of a truck near Broome in 1963. Grandfather

Dodson had reminded Her Majesty that Indigenous Australians weren't allowed to be citizens of their own country.

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The very first thing Marcia Langton remembers is lying on her back in the dirt staring up at the sun coming through the trees. It must have been in Brisbane, where she was born in 1951, or one or other of the little places she grew up in, along the road out west to Cunnamulla, where her grandmother was born and which was the other pole of her early life.

Langton was close to Ruby, and to Ruby's older sister, Teresa. When she was small she heard them speak their several Aboriginal languages, Bidjara and others, and listened to stories of a much older time in Queensland, back into the nineteenth century, when the Indigenous people of that vast state – those who were not penned up in reserves or living beyond settler reach or on the periphery of the big towns such as Brisbane – made their living on the margins of the squatter culture.

Ruby's father (Langton's great-grandfather) had an 'outfit' – horse, dray, dogs and camp equipment – and he serviced the drovers' camps, travelling with them across state borders and so eluding the attentions of the Queensland Native Affairs Department. Ruby travelled with her father and learnt young to make fires and cook, to help pitch and strike camp, and to scrub the cooking pots clean with river sand. She grew up as a free agent and was never registered as the inmate of a reserve. Later, she worked for years as cook and housekeeper in some of the big pastoral homesteads, every year preparing vast Christmas dinners before being shut out of the house while the owner families enjoyed them.

Her sister, Teresa, lived closer to her own people in Bollon, on the road to Cunnamulla, where Langton later lived for a time with her. It was a camp overseen by the Native Mounted Police, and Teresa too eluded the attentions of the white authorities, both secular and those of militant Christianity. Neither Ruby nor Teresa was ever 'missionised', and Langton quite readily reminds her listeners that she herself "grew up in a dirt-floored humpy".

Fred Waddy, who married Ruby and was Langton's grandfather, belonged to the Yiman people and was born, just after the start of the last century, on the banks of the Upper Dawson River in central Queensland, near the Carnarvon Gorge, among the Indigenous survivors of the frontier wars and the massacres that went on in the Dawson River valley from the 1870s to the 1890s. His mother died giving birth. Fred and his twin brother were sent to a reserve at Bundalla, near Taroom, most of whose inhabitants died in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Fred's relatives were buried in the two mass graves on the reserve, which was deregistered seven years later, but Fred himself, once again, survived.

He survived in later life, too, rather like Ruby's father – in Fred's case by working on the railways, building up a network of friends all over, riding the trains, keeping on the move, eluding confinement and the paper controls of Queensland's racial regime until he died in the 1980s. Ruby, who was several years older, outlived him by over a decade and died 15 years ago at the age of 96.

Marcia Langton's immediate antecedents are more problematic. Relations with her mother – Fred and Ruby's daughter Kathleen – who was born in 1924 and still lives in Brisbane, are fraught, and Kathleen Langton is for present purposes off limits. Langton's father, whom

Marcia identified but never had any interest in meeting, has had no presence in her life and virtually none in her mother's. The year after Langton was born, her mother married Douglas Langton, by whom she soon had two children, who were the favoured ones. Which is partly why the infant Langton got to know Ruby and Teresa so well.

Douglas Langton had come to Australia from Scotland as a small child, and when he met Kathleen Waddy he had just returned from fighting in the Korean War. He was traumatised by his war experience and, from being a heavy drinker, descended fast into acute alcoholism. He found it harder and harder to stay in work as a mechanic and eventually became a night hunter of kangaroos.

Langton's main memory of her stepfather is of helping him on his nocturnal slaughterings as a child, straining to reach the brake pedal with her small foot and to keep the truck's headlights trained on the animals, while her stepfather stood behind on the tray and steadied his rifle against the roof of the cab. Sometimes he made her get up and do the shooting. Friendless and intermittently violent, Douglas Langton drifted from the fringes of white society to the campfires of the Indigenous communities.

Kathleen Langton, who one intuitively was a disciplined woman and a trier – it must have been hard for her to surrender the care of her eldest daughter to older members of the family – worked at various jobs while bringing up three small children and coping with her husband's slide into alcoholism. There were frequent moves, along the Brisbane–Cunnamulla axis, and around the outer parts of Brisbane itself. Langton was not yet of school age when she found herself living with her mother in a tent on the beach on the edge of Brisbane. Soon after this her mother went away and Langton was placed for a time in an orphanage. But her mother recovered, came back, and the family show was on the road again.

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I was with Langton last summer in the Western District of Victoria. Under its corrugated iron roof, her old weatherboard cottage offered no relief from the day's heat. Only the Chinese temple guard was undisturbed under his thick red fur. The dog sat motionless on the lawn under the unkempt apple tree, paws out front, neck arched under his ruff, and gazed imperturbably at the little back verandah and the kitchen's flywire door. The Grampians shimmered grey and pointy in the haze.

The stifling heat of the early afternoon softened into something gentler and goldier. The Grampians took on the light of the sinking sun, and the shadows of the rocks and the textures of their bush cover shifted with the light. We ventured to a pub, elegantly remade after bushfires. Langton was happy to sit in the bar as the heat slowly bled from the afternoon. She'd once brought an elder from Arnhem Land here for a glass of wine, after a kangaroo hunt on a student's nearby family property, and remembered how courteously they received him.

Later, as we ate on this slowly greying evening, Langton talked about various meetings she and other Indigenous leaders had held over the past few years with some of Australia's most powerful industrialists. She wanted me to understand and share her sense that some of this country's very rich – nearly all men who had made, and not inherited, their enormous fortunes, and made them by hard work rather than financial cleverness – were keen to plough some of their wealth back into the ground of the country's first people.

I'd already glimpsed Langton's dealings with the global mining corporation Rio Tinto. Some weeks earlier, our first meeting in years had been moved at the last moment from Langton's office in the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Medicine to a place in Collins Street, which turned out to be Rio Tinto's Australian head office. She had spent half a day there going over various projects Rio Tinto was supporting that involved communities in the company's Australian places of operation. In the late afternoon a couple of days later, in the garden at University House, I'd listened to her talking with colleagues and students about Rio Tinto's program to employ young Indigenous people – a program of education, training, housing and long-term career possibilities. All listened intently.

In a difficult time, surprising optimism and excitement were abroad about the chances for some Indigenous communities. These matched Langton's straight look at the worst realities of life in others. She could look at the horrors of wasted lives because she saw specific ills that could be dealt with – alcoholism and welfare regimes – and not a generalised panorama of hopelessness. In the same way she saw mining companies as a specific source of employment and education and economic independence for Indigenous people, just as pastoral work once was. It was a matter, in both cases, of dealing with the here and now.

Langton was mightily impressed with the internal culture of Rio Tinto; not with BHP Billiton's. The other mining giant showed none of Rio Tinto's interest in understanding and working with Indigenous communities, and she thought their dealings appalling. At Rio Tinto, Langton found smart, hardworking and frank people with analytical intelligence and a practical bent, unafraid to admit error and look for new solutions when old ones failed. After the passing of the *Native Title Act 1993* they had shown they could rethink everything.

Langton's work with Rio Tinto coincided with another shift in her thinking. Ten years earlier she had moved from Darwin to Melbourne, and it was a move from the periphery to the centre of academic life in Australia. Langton arrived in a state of domestic and financial crisis from a poisonous situation in the Northern Territory University. She had piled her things into her indestructible LandCruiser and driven it south through Katherine and Alice and across the continent to Victoria; she was settling into her work at Melbourne when a snippy and impeccably groomed university secretary told her she'd never cut it in "this town" unless she learnt how to dress. The secretary offered to mentor Langton in the fine art of looking good in academe. Langton thanked her and stayed in her jeans, boots and loose upper garments.

After an enthusiastic start to her new job in Melbourne, she found herself being dragged down by a dead weight of received ideas in the Faculty of Arts and the politics of its inhabitants. Her position grew embattled as some people reacted with hostility and incomprehension to her evolving thoughts on Indigenous matters. Not only in the Faculty of Arts; I was surprised when a senior member of the university told me dismissively several years ago that Langton was "difficult". And "ungrateful" ran the implied corollary. The institution had welcomed her, and now she was creating problems. I said I bet she had plenty to be difficult about.

Langton was trailing unhappily home through the polyglot streets of Brunswick one evening in 2006 when she ran into Ian Anderson. Her face brightened considerably. Anderson, much younger than herself, was a professor in the Faculty of Medicine, an Indigenous academic and social health activist. Laden with shopping bags, Langton briefly recounted her woes. "I wish I worked with you," she said. "Why don't you?" Anderson replied.

For Langton the move to the Faculty of Medicine, where the Indigenous Studies Centre now is, paralleled the unexpected openness of the mining corporation. In Medicine she found a new culture, empirical and pragmatic, and a group of people who worked very hard indeed at finding solutions to carefully defined problems. In her professional life Langton has never been happier.

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She is the butterfly and the bee. I am a moth and I flew too close to the flame of her anger. Langton was talking, as our meal went on, about what remarkable people many of the super-rich were. She proposed that making money was a gift, a skill of the intellect and imagination; it used creative energy channelled down a different path. Myself, I had my doubts. Balzac's perception eluded me just then, that all great fortunes have their origin in great crimes, or I would have mentioned it. I tried to get this exchange off the table, so I might hear from Langton about her dealings with these people.

Langton grabbed her phone, pressed it to her ear and walked out of the restaurant. For the next half-hour I sat alone, watching her silhouette moving back and forth along the verandah, as the larger shadow of the Grampians faded behind her into darkness. When she came back she said an ethnomusicologist had just been inducted into an Arnhem Land tribe and wanted to talk about it. At great length, evidently. "You could have said, 'I'll ring you back in an hour,'" I said.

Langton turned on me. "This is how I live, OK?" Meaning constantly on the move, around the country, around the world – speaking, negotiating, writing, needing to be available, needing to stay in touch. She was right. She has an international presence and often speaks at conferences and seminars overseas. She runs her unbelievably various and complicated life, under all sorts of pressures and uncertainties, essentially without help. Once during my stay, I got up early to use her phone and found a reminder from the night before: "Start of legal year. Write speech for International Commission of Jurists."

She was angry now. "You had your dessert, didn't you?" she snarled. Another soft white. There was the briefest of pauses, time to draw breath and she got going properly. "And don't go talking at me like I'm a stupid *airhead* infatuated with *rich* people." This was what was really on her mind and it went on for some time, theme and variations with heavy underlinings. She was angry with herself for her little rush of love for the very rich, angry with me for sounding like one of the white leftists who'd blighted her work. I stared at her teeth, which were thrust toward me across the table, lips curled back from them. My throat felt about to be torn out.

My mind stayed lucid under the quivering furious glare and when she abruptly stopped I knew exactly what I wanted to say. But I couldn't talk. I thought she was right to deal with mining companies, right to respond to philanthropists, right to ally herself with the empiricism of medical science, right to think Indigenous people should control their own lives and take responsibility for them. And all I could do was cover my face with my hands.

The dining room fell quiet and emptied fast. I called for the bill but messed up the payment. Langton took over. "Sign here," she said. "And here." On the way out I thanked the hip young black-clad wait staff, but they had morphed back into country kids and just gaped after us as we headed for the door.

We returned to the cottage in silence. I was trembling and deadened but her eyes were now sparkling in the dark. She prowled the house and, seeing my weakened state, loosed a few more assaults, like a cat cuffing a wounded bilby to see if it offered any last sport. She questioned me on my sexual history as she never had before. She was seeking confirmation for a story that might have been dreamt up by a Brontë sister, a drama of obsessive love and death and madness unfolding over many years and several continents. It was an amazing scenario and I regretted it was fantasy. For a moment she made me feel quite interesting. “So you’re a loner,” she said finally. “Like me. The mistakes I’ve made in my life.” Meaning her private life and not the main story.

The mauled bilby hadn’t quite given up the ghost. Feeling newly in control of her master narrative, Langton announced the resumption of her life history. We didn’t get far – I could still hardly speak let alone write – but I did hit back on the question of her mother. Langton has issues with her mother and now, as she ran over her early coming to consciousness, I remarked that in all the trials – through all the displacements – of her early years, Langton never seemed to have missed a day’s school. She could remember names and dates for every primary school she’d ever attended, more than one per year, and wrote them all out in a long neat list. I said, quavering voice firming up a bit, that it was a remarkable achievement of her mother’s to have ensured this. There was a long pause before Langton finally said in a low voice, “Yes.”

Waking next morning, I thought about the pressures she is under, this lonely woman, whom not enough people have told how much she’s loved and valued. The overt racists who still abound in Australia sometimes seem the least of the problem. There are the institutional politicians; certain older male Indigenous leaders; a Left mouldering in its preconceptions and still entrenched in universities and government; and a Green movement she has accused, apropos of Queensland’s *Wild Rivers* legislation, of “environmental racism”.

Utter consistency again. What are land rights, what is Native Title, unless Indigenous people can determine how they live on their own land? I recalled her talking in Kakadu a decade before, as we climbed towards some rock paintings, about the bushwalkers and environmentalists who complained the Indigenous inhabitants of the land were spoiling their pristine wilderness. In politics Langton seeks no allies, takes no prisoners.

After coffee we filled large plastic bags with pillows of soot from the wood stove and heaps of ancient mouse shit from the food cupboards, while the temple guard patrolled the perimeter and Professor Langton imparted brisk orders for an existential makeover. Capitalise on mental assets. “Sometimes I feel like slapping you. I won’t, but that’s how I feel.” She was feeling kind and helpful that morning in the kitchen. Suddenly she burst out delightedly, “I’m going to live more like you.” I think she meant not eating birds or animals.

We never got to talk about her five straight years of secondary schooling at Aspley State High School. The Aspley State High website (“Not for one’s self, but for all”), shows a uniform of a hideous electric blue and describes a curriculum that today includes an Indigenous Student Support Program, which “centres on our Harmony Room”. Langton, who was there from 1964 until the end of 1968, has recalled it as a place “where old-fashioned racism was the order of the day”. All the same, it helped her move straight from school to the University of Queensland in 1969.

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Langton spent a single year at the University of Queensland. By the end of that year, and just after her eighteenth birthday, she was the mother of a son. She was sharing a house with several other people – one a painter, who first aroused her long and intense love of art – and became involved with an architecture student from New Zealand. That year was also the first of Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s two decades as premier of the state. Langton felt she’d had enough. With her partner and her son, Ben, who was a few weeks old, and with no money, Langton headed north in the first days of 1970. She would be away for five years.

She began a two-year peregrination around the Asian rim of the Pacific that would last until 1972. She travelled by local boats, buses, trains, earning her keep as she went and caring for her infant son. First she went to Papua New Guinea with Ben and his father. Even the airport amazed the girl from Queensland; it was “entirely staffed by black people”. They travelled through the hill country and Langton realised, “the whole country was black”. After six months they caught a boat to Yokohama.

They stayed in Japan for half a year. Langton found night work in bars and during the day she looked after Ben, studied Japanese and explored Japanese culture. She was strongly drawn to Zen, and her awareness of Buddhism would expand as she moved around Asia among its many local variants. None of this was hippie idyll but the teenage Aboriginal single mother from Queensland and her newborn baby, who was becoming a toddler in Asia, kept their heads above water.

Langton’s sense of the world was transformed in Asia. She had grown up in a world of poverty, police brutality and arbitrary racism, under a regime of de facto apartheid where blacks walked on one side of the road and sat on one side of the classroom. After the first revelation of a wholly black society in Papua New Guinea, Langton discovered as she moved around Asia the amazing delights of racial invisibility, of living like an Asian in Asia, “free of endless daily racism. To Asians I wasn’t black.” For the first time, outside Australia, Langton felt she was living as a full human being.

She discovered something else, too. The Asian places she visited were full of African Americans. All of them were young and male – “tall, fit and feral” – and traumatised by their war experiences in Vietnam, from which they were resting up before being recycled, or from which they had absconded. “I was on the edge of the Vietnam War. They were off their heads all over Asia.” Japan in 1970 was a rest and recreation destination for American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and a friend took Langton to a club “full of freaked-out black troops” huddled together. “They were very scary.”

Toward the end of that year Langton went by boat to Okinawa for a couple of weeks, where she glimpsed the scale of the American military presence in Asia. The trio caught a boat to Taiwan, stayed there some months, then caught another to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, Ben’s father met another woman and Langton was alone with her child of a year and a half. She lived by making batik scarves and selling them on the street.

Hong Kong too was teeming with black soldiers, all getting suits made. Ike and Tina Turner were entertaining the troops, and Langton went to a concert. From her work in bars and visits to clubs she had become interested in black music in Tokyo, which had “a weird music scene”.

She took Ben south to Jakarta and on to Surabaya and by the end of 1971 they were in Bali. Sitting on the beach one day she saw a bunch of American soldiers tramping along the sand – short hair, military backpacks, badly dressed, with a frightening haunted look in their eyes. These ones were white. In Brisbane a couple of years before, Langton had joined demonstrations against the Vietnam War, but now she found herself feeling deeply sorry for these AWOLs. They were “war fodder”, and to see them was “like looking at death”.

Getting over a bout of amoebic dysentery, she read a lot of contemporary American writers. One of them was William Burroughs, whose hallucinated, satirical vision of the American imperium’s outer reaches was not so far from what Langton was finding on the ground. She took Ben back through Indonesia, and up through Malaysia and southern Thailand to Bangkok. Crazy American military were everywhere.

But Langton was fascinated by her glimpses of black America – by black music, by the anti-war movement, by Black Power. In the US it was the time of Angela Davis, the Soledad Brothers, Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers. When in 1972 she made her “terrible mistake” and got on a plane for New York with Ben, she already knew “I was flying into the heart of Babylon.” Arrival in New York was “like landing in hell”. Before she was even oriented in the city some white slavers kidnapped her for their prostitution ring. They kept her imprisoned in a room and took away her clothes. Eventually the woman guarding her fell asleep and Langton slipped naked out of an unlocked window and ran for help to a passing cop.

Having seen the traumatised soldiers abroad, she now found that Americans at home were not all that different. At least race was not a problem for her: she slipped between. “I’ve always been an in between kind of person. Except in Queensland.” Living in a “weird hotel”, she continued her reading: American feminists and writers on Buddhism, a lot of French writers in translation. She went to a Buddhist retreat in Tennessee and saw James Brown in Georgia. Ben’s father reappeared and took him to Montreal, where Langton later joined them. She wintered there in an unheated apartment and worked in a kindergarten.

Canada’s winter cooled the excitement of Asia and the horror of Babylon. After four years out in the world she felt the pull of home. In January 1975 she was back in Australia. Two months later, from the back of a dimly lit room above a Greek takeaway on Parramatta Road in Sydney, I first glimpsed her radiantly beautiful face, haloed like Angela Davis’s by magnificent Afro hair. Firing up the revolutionary vanguard, she lisped about the history of pastoral settlement and “black velvet”.

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The voice has hardened over the decades, and carries better now. Her smoker’s laugh sounds like a turboprop readying for take-off. The gaze is still implacable and so is the unyielding manner. Langton has always seemed strangely unaware of her social presence. She is always about what she is about. But now, as then, she constantly surprises with heart-melting leaps into candour and openness. These are no more or less than signals of trust, when the armour clatters to the ground and the delicate hesitant sensibility of the young girl glows in her words and intonation.

When you have her trust her talk is relentless and wonderful. She has a lethal eye for detail, a feel for the comic drama of bad faith caught *in flagrante*, a mimic’s ear and a satirical tongue

that is cruelly constrained when she is on public display or finds herself among people she doesn't quite trust. Sometimes you are one of them. Then the mask descends, the eyes are hooded, and people fear her.

Ben stayed with Langton on her long trek through the lower reaches of the academy. He was a tow-haired child with large pale eyes and when he started school he needed serious glasses, which bigger kids kept smashing. As a penniless student single mother, Langton couldn't afford replacements. She took Ben to a friend from Thursday Island who was a master of martial arts. Ben learned to deal with bullies, and so did Langton, who is always ready herself to handle any trouble on the streets.

At home in Brunswick, she has her big stone Buddha statue in the long grass out front by the little verandah, the smaller one in the jungle out the back and a tiny effigy in brass on the windowsill over the kitchen sink. The temple guard occupies the front verandah. Langton's been a Buddhist – "I'm a lazy Buddhist" – ever since she lived in Asia. For her, the social struggle is intimately and unfashionably a part of becoming a better person. Remaking the self and remaking the world are the same. Transcendence and liberation may follow.

Ben works in IT and lives with his wife and children on a farm in his father's New Zealand. When Langton returned from a recent visit I asked about Ben's wife. After a moment she replied, "Well, I finally got her to understand a few things." Langton remains fiercely protective of her daughter, Ruby, who was born from a later relationship and who since graduating has begun work in theatre design. "Mum's always full-on," Ruby remarked to me once, and I didn't demur.