

Reading lessons

Kathleen Epelde August 2012 (NT)

I've been bumping along this dirt road for two hours and I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever see a sign for Docker River. *Maybe I drove right past it*, I think, lulled into a stupor by this bone-jangling ride with nothing to look at but mulga bushes and this red road stretching out before me in a straight line that seems to go on forever.

But there haven't been any signs since I turned onto this road, back at Uluru, just mile after mile of monotonous mulga-filled landscape. I'm sure of it. Seeing a sign would have been a major event out here. Then the glint of metal catches my eye and I look over to see a dusty old hubcap hanging from a mulga bush. Relief floods through me.

The desert is full of these things—an old tyre or some empty Coke or VB cans tied together and dangling from a bush. I used to fly past them, thinking they were rubbish. Then someone told me they were signs for tracks that led to outstations. And then they had to tell me what an outstation was.

My growing knowledge of bush lore also includes the fact that outstations are always near communities (because they're comprised of people who got fed up with some aspect of life on the community so they pulled up stakes and left). I'm learning all kinds of things on this new job, teaching literacy to Aboriginal women. Half of the workshops take place in Alice Springs, and the other half on remote communities. Those are the ones I enjoy the most. It's a whole other world out here and I love it.

Sure enough, about ten miles later, a small handmade sign on the side of the road says: *You've got 40 miles to go!* I laugh out loud, giddy with relief. Later, another sign appears. "Katulkatjara," it proclaims in large hand-painted letters, with 'Docker River' in smaller ones below. Usually it's the other way around. Or no Indigenous name at all.

The longer I live here, the more I realize that there are two distinct realities at work in Central Australia. There is the story on the surface, the colonial one that began a hundred and fifty years ago when men walked over this country, stretching a line of wire across it to connect them to their home, half a world away. As they went, they named the mountains and dry riverbeds for themselves and their patrons.

But beneath these English names, embedded in the ancient red earth, lies another, older story that tells how, millions of years ago, ancestor creatures emerged from the void to create this land, calling it into being as they walked across it.

That's about all we whitefellas know of the Dreaming, that and the handful of stories Aboriginal people put into the public domain. But there are deeper levels to this



story. Anyone who has studied these people—and they’ve been studied to death—knows that there are complexities of meaning that we can never know. Aboriginal people move through the world differently to us. The land is alive to them, a living presence they read like a text.

I pull up in front of the Council Office in Docker River, to get the key to the donga that I’ll be staying in. It feels good to stretch. Suddenly, a boy of about ten rides up on a bike, sliding to a stop in front of me. He’s wearing a spider man t-shirt and his black hair is all slicked up with mousse.

‘Hullo! Do you have a smoke?’ he asks.

I laugh and he pedals off in a cloud of red dust.

The front door of the office is locked so I walk around and pound on a side door. It opens a crack and an old man with olive skin and a classic Roman nose peers out. Beneath the bill of his baseball cap are beady brown eyes, suspicious with the weight of centuries of Sicilian feudalism. They regard me with an expression that asks, ‘Friend or foe?’

I don’t have to say anything. My white skin is the password. He opens the door wide enough to let me in, and shuts it quickly, as though there’s a mob of people armed with nulla nullas behind me. Then he motions me down the hall, and settles back in his chair, the Godfather of Docker River.

A sign on the door of the first office says ‘Council CEO.’ This title used to amuse me, until I saw what power these people wield. From grotty little offices like this one, these people rule communities across the desert like petty despots. They’re socking the money away, topping up their super or saving for whatever dream it is they’re chasing, as they live, clustered in dongas topped with satellite dishes on the edges of communities, like parasites. In the evening, they circle the wagons, driving their sturdy four-wheel-drive vehicles inside the fence and lock the gate with a big padlock.

I glance into the CEO’s office. He looks typical, an overweight guy in his fifties, wearing the male uniform out here: shorts, T-shirt, and blunnies. The blunnies are propped up on the desk, as he leans back in his chair, talking profits on the phone.

The next door is labeled ‘Administrative Assistant,’ so I knock and a woman looks up from her computer. She looks stressed, like most of the whitefellas you meet on communities. But her face softens when I introduce myself, and she recognizes me from our phone conversation the week before.

‘Oh, right!’ she says, and asks me how the road was. We chat for a few minutes and then she tells me that Maxine in Reception has the key to my accommodation.

So I walk down to the end of the hall and turn left. But Maxine looks like she’s in jail. Iron bars divide her from the reception area I’m standing in. *A reception room that’s locked to the public and a receptionist behind bars, I think. Siege mentality at its worst.*



It's an effort for Maxine to get up and walk over to a wall covered in keys, but she does, huffing back to her chair to make a notation in a big ledger. Then she slides the keys under the bars, letting me know that she's completed her job now and I'm not to come back with any more demands: 'I only clean 'em,' she says.

On my way out the door, I glance into a room on my right, and see one of my students, sitting at a table with stacks of index cards piled up in front of her.

'Lizzie! What are you doing here?'

'Working!' she says, standing up and flashing me her infectious smile, strong white teeth against brown skin.

'I gotta talk to my teacher,' she calls out to Maxine in an authoritative voice, as she takes my arm and steers me through the door onto the verandah. Her hand is smooth and her grip is strong. I ask her if she'll be at the workshop tomorrow.

'Uwa,' she assures me.

'How about Beverly and Barbara?'

'Uwa.' Then she takes my arm again, patting it as she walks me to my car.

'But we can only study in the morning,' she says.

'Why?' I screech, stopping to look her square in the face. I've just driven seven hours from Alice Springs to deliver a three-day workshop. I was planning on covering a lot of ground and now these three will be behind.

'We got business,' she says firmly. 'Big mob coming from all over. We meetin' over Haast's Bluff way,' she says, gesturing sideways with her hand in the air the way Aboriginal people around here do—with fingers together and palm down. They never point; it's always this sideways wave. It takes me a couple of seconds to work out the direction she's indicating. Sure enough, it's northeast, which is where Haast's Bluff lies.

And once again, I am amazed. Every time one of my students has ever mentioned a place to me, they always gesture in its direction like this, and they are never wrong. These people know exactly where they are in relation to country at all times. They belong to this land. They read it like a book.

But a sense of frustration is getting the better of amazement in me at the moment. These women need to improve their English skills to function better in the outside world which is, increasingly, their world, too. The distances out here are a huge obstacle to learning, making it difficult to maintain any kind of continuity. And on top of that are the cultural differences. Their priorities are not mine. When I do get back out here to Docker River, there might be sorry business going on and they are away for weeks at a time for that. Or there could be more women's business. Or the whole community might have taken off for a footy carnival somewhere.

But what can I say? Besides, Lizzie's not really asking my permission.



'Okay,' I sigh, and she grins.

The next morning, I wake up just as dawn is breaking. I go outside to drink my tea and watch the red hills emerge from the dark, like a creature from the deep. Desert oaks begin to appear too, looking like lonely sentinels, their long, delicate needles hanging from branches, slightly askew. It feels like the first morning, so still, I can almost hear the land breathe.

After breakfast, I walk over to the training centre to meet Ann, a teacher from another training organization with whom I'll be working, and we jump into the Troopie to drive around and pick up the students. That's how it's done out here. None of the women has a landline in their home, and only a few have mobiles. I used to send notices of the workshops out to their post office boxes, but no one ever seemed to read them. Life is lived in the present.

So our first stop is the store, the meeting place. About a dozen people are standing out here, warming themselves in the sun. A couple of wiry old stockmen in battered cowboy hats are smoking and talking off to one side, and women stand around chatting as their kids play in the dirt. The morning light, so bright it seems almost liquid, bathes the scene, making brilliant contrasts of brown skin against the soft red earth and the deep blue of the shop wall, covered in a bright mural of animals and bush tucker.

Ann asks after Mavis O'Donnell, one of the students, and a woman tells her that she's in town. So we drive over to Mavis' house.

Like all houses on communities, it's a squat, concrete structure with a few broken windows, surrounded by dirt that is strewn with detritus, everything from mattresses and blankets to abandoned car parts and used nappies. There are broken toys, empty tins and bottles and, at the bottom of the fence, a border of rubbish, bits of paper and plastic blown there by the wind and caught.

A group of women is sitting on the ground out front, warming themselves around a small fire.

'G'day, Gabriella!' Ann says in a cheery voice as we approach.

The girl doesn't look up as she sits cross-legged, smoothing the dirt with a stick. She just keeps moving the stick back and forth, like a window wiper.

'Do you want to study today?' Ann asks, and I cringe a little. She sounds patronizing.

The girl must think so too because, suddenly, she starts beating the ground with the stick, then digs up the area she's just smoothed. Dirt flies everywhere. It's wrecked.

'Or do you want to leave it?' Ann asks quietly.

'Leave it!' the girl says, throwing the stick down and walking away.



It's quiet for a moment as we all stare into the fire. So much is going on beneath the surface here that we will never know. These people are up against tremendous pressures out here, trying to hang on to the land, caught between tradition and the demands of change.

Mavis comes out of the house. She's a big woman, and she walks up to Ann, frowning. Ann poses the same question in a sunny voice, to which Mavis replies with a question of her own: Will they get lunch?

The bribe. Eating our food was the beginning of the end for these people. Reading accounts of first contact that took place out here in the Western Desert, from the 1930s to as late as 1984, it was always food that brought the few remaining tribes in. They were starving from years of drought.

Ann assures her that there will be lunch, but Mavis wants to know what.

'Lasagna,' Ann says.

'And salad?'

'No, no salad today.'

'We need healthy food!' Mavis replies. She has a point and Ann knows it. If we're going to provide food, we should practice what we preach.

Mavis decides to settle for lasagna anyway. She climbs into the back of the Troopie along with a couple of the other women and directs us to the house of another woman who has expressed interest in studying.

Phyllis, a thin girl who looks about eighteen, is outside, warming herself by a fire too, as she breastfeeds a baby. When Ann asks if she wants to study, the girl stands up and, without a word, gets into the car, the child still at her breast.

At the training centre, there's a flurry of activity as the women fill out enrolment forms and begin the placement test. They take the pencil and paper and begin. If a baby starts to cry, its mother simply pulls up her shirt and lets the child suckle, not missing a beat as she continues working. Their hair is matted and their clothes are dirty. Most are barefoot. But they work, heads down, with a fierce concentration.

It's impressive. And a little sad. One wears a football jersey with the words 'No Limit' above the number. But they have a long ways to go before any of them will be able to work at a real job. The only places where that could happen out here are the Council, the store, the clinic, and the school—the four institutions found on every community. But all of those are run by whitefellas.

Well, that's why you're here, I tell myself. It's not going to happen overnight but, in time, the situation will improve. For now, though, these women seem imprisoned in these welfare ghettos in the desert.



They love to come to Alice Springs for workshops, a measure of the fact that life on the communities is not as rosy as it's often portrayed. Alice is a holiday for them. The last time they were in Alice, I asked them to write a story about it. Linda, one of the best students in the class, wrote this in a childlike scrawl:

My name is Linda Dooley. I live at Docker River community. And I am 23 year old. I am go for workshop to Alice Springs. I was so happy to be in Alice Springs. We studied very hard. And I will finish this study. We went to Desert Park then after that went to Telegraph Station to have barbecue. That was fun. My favourite footy team is the Demons that would be red and the blue. Last year we went to the town pool for swimming.

Suddenly, I remember Lizzie. I'd told her yesterday that I'd pick her and the other two women up so they could at least study for the morning.

I pull up in front of her house and honk. After a few minutes, she appears and walks over to the Troopie, heaving her body up into it. Then she directs me down the road, to pick up Beverly and Barbara.

We stop at a house painted a bright turquoise and she yells out the window in Pitjantjatjara. A woman I've never seen before comes out, and Lizzie goes to meet her in the middle of the dirt patch that passes for a yard. Lizzie does most of the talking. The woman listens intently, nodding and saying "uwa" now and then. The only other word I recognize is 'tjukurpa.' Law.

Then they both say 'palya' and it's settled.

'That wasn't Beverly or Barbara!' I say when she gets back in the car. 'And you weren't talking about study either.'

She smiles, a little slyly.

'We got business!'

'But this car is for study!'

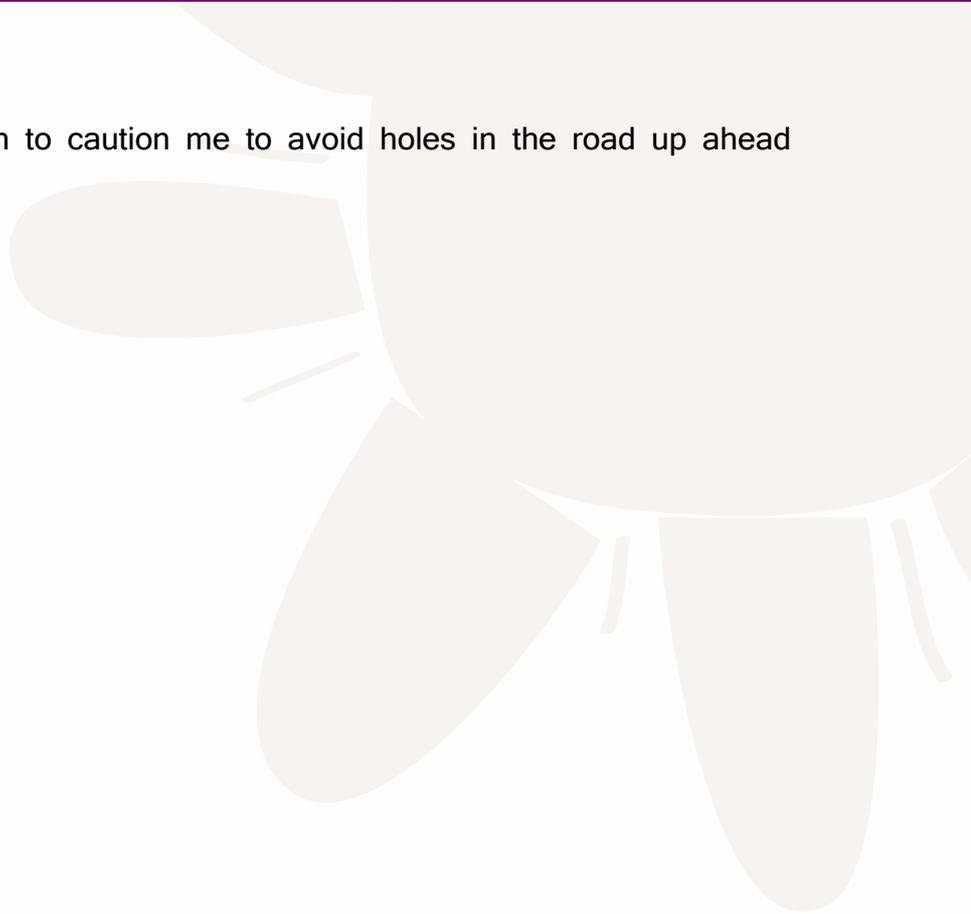
It's a weak protest. I've accepted my role here. I'm just the person with the car. I'll be lucky if I get out of here without her hijacking it to Haasts Bluff.

She directs me to three more houses, going through the same routine at each, yelling for a woman who silently appears, listens, and gives her assent. By that afternoon, Lizzie will have found a car and she and half a dozen women will have taken off for Haast's Bluff, eight hours away, on dirt roads. They'll be gone for a week or two, however long it takes to sing the songs, do the dances, and pass on the stories. To sing the country up, keep the land alive. What could be more important than that?

And so we bump along the maze of dirt tracks that run through the community. At each fork in the road, Lizzie waves her hand in the direction she wants me to go, that



little sideways wave, using it again to caution me to avoid holes in the road up ahead that I can't even see.



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