

day at the races under a bridge of lies - Age, The/The Sunday Age (Melbourne, Australia) - November 14, 1993 - page 3

November 14, 1993 | Age, The/The Sunday Age (Melbourne, Australia) | Bruce Pascoe | Page 3

Continuing his travels around Australia, writer **Bruce Pascoe** hears some disturbing stories of racial tension in the outback.

'APMHERE mwerra," he murmurs. The first thing he has said all day. A four-hour return trip to Alice Springs in silence until, on the way home, a rise in the road reveals the Harts Range and he leans across to the white man and murmurs: "Apmhere mwerra", beautiful country, home country to the Atitjere people, place of the yam dreaming where garnets strew the sand.

Rosalie Petrick isn't filled with too much joy at the prospect of meeting a whitish man, but this is business time, time to make sure that the stories of her people are recorded so that nothing will be lost.

"This is law," she says, and presses a hand on to a page (this is as demonstrative as she gets). "We're not interested in making pretty books for tourists, we want to make sure the law is remembered." There is much to be remembered. Such as how a policeman rounded up and shot two young men. The crime was never revealed. A 100 years ago, you guess? No. 15. About the same time as the world was singing John Lennon's 'Give Peace a Chance'.

Rosalie's brother Eric doesn't go in for too much humbug either. He's a footballer who lived for many years in the fleshpots of Alice, enjoying the status of a star player. But he came home, left the slaps on the back and the celebratory pots to return to his people's land.

Atitjere is a dry (no-alcohol) community and the direction of the town is fiercely supervised by the elders. This is important, this place, this is law business, there must be no mistakes here. The little children must be taught what it is to be Atitjere, to be proud of their race, their color, their place.

I tell Eric I've seen one of the most horrible sights Australia has to offer. At the Harts Range racecourse the white members have built a raised concourse that allows them to walk from the members' stand, above the crowd, to the afternoon tea rooms. The members are white.

The crowd is black.

I can't help staring at this weird structure. Am I in Johannesburg? No, this is my country, these are my countrymen doing this. White journalists and writers have waxed lyrical about the innocent charms of the picnic races at Harts Range where the good ol' boys, the white folks, own all the horses and the black fellers ride them. They describe the cheerful sight of all the Aboriginal people in their bright shirts and dresses sitting up on a ridge of orange rock, the indigenes' grandstand.

Why didn't they mention the white fellers' concourse? The bridge of lies that allows them to escape contact with their black brothers? Where's the brotherhood? Eric tells me that one wild Arrernte man had a few cups too many and started to swear a bit the year before the concourse was built.

"He was only swearing with the words the white feller taught him. We don't have those words in our language," Eric remarks.

We're standing at the old police station. Eric points to the trees where Aboriginal people were chained up for weeks on end. "What was their crime?" I ask. Eric shrugs. "Swearing?" I suggest, and for the first time he laughs, grimly.

He tells me another story about how a myall bloke, wild-feller Aborigine, started shooting policemen and their cars. He caused quite a bit of trouble until they caught up with him.

"Why did he start shooting the police?" I ask Eric. Yeah, you're right, it wasn't such a bright question. Eric gives me the longest, steadiest look he's given me all day. Fair enough, Eric: Who needs a reason in a country with this history? I must tell you another story that I was told that day. Not in any exaggerated attempt to gild the lily but because I'm sure you will find this an amazing thing to be happening in your country.

A lot of Atitjere people had just returned from the MountIsa rodeo when a message reached town that one of their cousins had been killed in a road accident. No accident, said the rumor sweeping the community, the Ku Klux Klan ran him off the road. Come on, you might say, that's a bit of a long bow to draw. Well, my countrymen and women, outside MountIsa there is a pile of massive stones and the vandals haven't painted their own names on the rocks, not the year they last won the footy premiership, not heart with their sweethearts' names inside, no, none of these innocent graffiti, they've painted KKK on the rock in letters a metre high. What country did we say we were in? On the way home, Eric's son goes to sleep on my arm. I see Eric's eyes swivel towards his son with a look, not just of love and gentleness: there's a purpose here, this boy must grow up strong. All day he's been listening to his father's stories, travelling through his father's land, trudging round the mica mine where his great-grandfathers had been slaves for the white boss. It is important that this child they call "Bigger Boy" know all this, know the recent history and the distant history of his people.

Bigger Boy went to hospital a few years back to fix up a throat problem and caught a hospital-strain pneumonia. Nearly killed him. His weight halved and thus his name. He used to be a bigger boy.

To the Arrernte people, kids who have been very sick are special. In the trauma of their illness they have travelled to a special place and are wiser because of it.

MY SON is playing with a boy who has a congenital hip problem that causes him to limp badly. Doesn't stop him doing 360s on his bike or fighting with the other kids, but it restricts him enough so that he spends a bit more time with the adults back at camp.

His white-feller name is Julius Bloomfield and it suits him incredibly well. He's the kind of kid whose eye misses nothing, who asks the difficult question, who gets himself involved in the business of the community, so much so that his Aunty Lena has to ask us to take him from the outstation of MountEaglebeak back to Atitjere so that he can go to school.

Lyn apologises for using our son's name in front of Julius. Our son has to be called Kumanjayi

because a man with the same name died recently. Julius doesn't scold, but points out that this is the fourth time she has done it. That name must not be spoken in case the dead man's spirit is encouraged to try to come back and live among the people. He must be allowed to pass on, to rest. Julius is anxious that this be allowed to happen.

The Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins is an initiated man from this area and he also has to be called Kumanjaji, and to his great credit asks to be referred to as Kumanjaji Perkins on national television.

Perkins sends a fax to the community outlining the required processes in a land excision they've been working for. At the bottom of the fax is a postscript: "Tell Uncle that I've got his starter motor." Perkins has tribal obligations to various people at Atitjere, and one of his uncles requested a starter motor for his EH Holden. Not an easy item to acquire these days, but Perkins found one and Uncle's car is back on the road.

At the recent sports carnival, Perkins was timekeeper for the football and had to leave halfway through the second quarter to take a phone call from Canberra. But he took his stopwatch with him and the quarter finished spot on time: Aboriginal law is a powerful thing.

A very powerful thing. A few years back, a white station-owner stole one of the Atitjere's sacred churinga stones. This was a vast offence to the people but they were powerless to do anything in the face of the white boss's insolence. But the old men nodded their heads together. Wait, they said, the stone has the power, it is too powerful for a white man to carry.

Inexplicably, the station-owner ran off the road in broad daylight and killed himself. He would have seen a snake cross the road, the old people said, but not just any kind of snake - a sacred snake.

A policeman attending the accident took possession of the stone and refused to return it to the people. He, too, ran off the road and was killed. He would have seen a white dingo run across in front of him, the people say - Julius's big white dog that the white cop shot because it didn't have a collar.

Eric Petrick isn't too sure about Julius's theory, but that a dingo from the Atitjere dingo dreaming was involved in the accident he has no doubt. It is against the law to shoot dingoes and against the law for uninitiated men to handle sacred stones.

The stone is buried again now, safe in Atitjere land, a powerful stone of a powerful people.

Atitjere country is a land of spinifex and mulga savannah ribbed by the dramatic East MacDonnell ranges. In the evening, the ridgetops glower blue, mauve and rose and stretch away across the land like the peaks and troughs of a troubled ocean.

They find minerals here and gemstones: garnet, crystal, zebra stone, amethyst. Fossickers come from all over the world to hunt for gems here. The Atitjere intend to set up a caravan park and gemstone workshop where the stones can be faceted and polished as a service to the tourists. A similar venture is well established down the track at Gem Tree, a nifty tourist establishment catering almost exclusively for fossickers.

It certainly doesn't cater for Aboriginal people. The manager won't let black people use the toilets! What country did we say we were in? The Atitjere people seem too civilised to hate but they are shocked by the bigotry and downright racism of some white people. Where another people might smoulder with indignation and consume itself with plans for revenge, these people seem simply perplexed and hurt.

This is not a useful kind of attitude for defeating a foe, but it is a flawless philosophy for a people that refuses to leave its land even if surrounded by a white man's fences.

At the moment the Atitjere hold two excisions, each covering one square mile. One is the old mission area, the other the old police compound. Two square miles, yet these people have always been here, have never left their land, and under the Mabo ruling they stand to get zero benefit.

The elevated concourse of the Harts Range racecourse should be considered a symbol for the new Australian flag. Forget Southern Crosses, ears of wheat and the Sydney Harbor Bridge, let's have a symbol of the secret thoughts of too many Australians. Let us fight our next war under a flag of truth and let our politicians shut up about South Africa until we've earned the right to comment.

Come what may, the Atitjere are here to stay. Their spirits are entrenched in the land and their feet bound to the soil by the roots of the yam dreaming. No insult, no deprivation, no mockery can defeat Rosalie Petrick, Julius Bloomfield and the resolute Atitjere now: they've seen the worst and their faces are turned steadfastly towards the brand new day.

Bruce Pascoe is a writer and publisher of 'Australian Short Stories' magazine. He is travelling round Australia with his family.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Bruce Pascoe, 'A day at the races under a bridge of lies', *Sunday Age, The* (online), 14 Nov 1993 3
<<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AUNB&docref=news/11BC504C5A56B4D0>>

Copyright © 1993 The Age Company Limited. www.theage.com.au. Not available for re-distribution.