(re)visiting the **corporate** world

The Matrix Evolution

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I am now almost exactly where I was ten years ago: back in Melbourne; living, again, in North Fitzroy; back at Melbourne University—working as well as studying here this time. Such a neat repeat of geography, down to the very same bike route, makes me wonder if I were more a tourist than I thought during those in-between years. (Was it inevitable that I leave both corporate Sydney and remote Aurukun, or does it only look that way now that my life has folded back on itself with all the perverse symmetry of a Rorschach test?)

Such a situation tempts me to make the metaphor of time as a mirror, through which I can look from here to there. If me-then looked in and me-now looked out, what would I/we see? But I'm beginning to think the two of us are not really so different and it would be more accurate to range us on the same side of the glass, peering into the looking-glass lands where I've been.

There are worlds we only ever see from the outside: literally, through the viewfinder of a lens or the prism of someone else's words, or, more metaphorically, framed by our own perspective and blinkered by expectations. But then there are those that we enter—think we enter—when we believe the glass has become like gauze, and it's only after we leave that we realise our encounter was always (only) an adventure with a beginning and an end. The fact of our leaving—even though it might not seem like a certainty at first—alters the very nature of our stay. This doesn't make the experience any less real: it is the real experience of someone who can leave, and was probably always going to.

But there is still the story of that time.

— First, a confession

I was warned by those working on the Cape that I'd be called a 'blow-in'. I assumed they meant by the traditional owners, but by the time I left I wondered if others might've treated me differently if they'd thought I was going to stay. Not that I noticed them acting any differently towards me—then again, they all seemed in a strange state of permanent transience—but I was trying to find a way to explain some mind-boggling behaviour: warning me against buying off milk but leaving it on the shelves for 'the locals' to buy. That was the whites' revealing term for the blacks. I was advised not to get too friendly with the locals, but would've done better to keep more distance from those who defined themselves, by implication, as not-from-there.

Memory is notoriously unreliable: we don't just do things differently in the past, we do things differently depending on where we're looking back from. I wrote about my time in the corporate sector quite soon after I got out, but I didn't write about how I got out.[1] Some worlds, after all, aren't that easy to leave. Looking back, it's like I had to swing from one extreme to another, had to use the momentum of an onwards and upwards trajectory to launch myself right out of that wonderland to something just as far removed from the middle-road I now travel (again).

In my case, the problem was mostly money. I'd adopted a comparatively lavish lifestyle—complete with mortgage and car loan, barfly and beautician habit—not only because I could, and everyone did, but because it helped to justify a job and salary that I was starting to question. Soon enough, though, that style of living bound me to the very job that had led me to adopt it. The irony didn't escape me, but it didn't help me either. What did help, in the end, was a company scheme offering secondments to remote Aboriginal communities in Far North Queensland. At the risk of over-sentimentality, it was my salvation: my way out of where I was and back to who I am. What it—or I—was to the community that took me in is something else again. And possibly something that I can't presume to completely understand.

On my first day at work I stuck a sign on the office door: Monday–Friday 9am–5pm. Should I write up my lunch hours? I soon discovered that not only could many of my 'clients' not read, but I lived across the street and if I wasn't at work they just came to the house. I was happy enough to abandon the idea of a set routine and was soon leaving early when it rained and shutting the door when I wanted to get paperwork done or it was Centrelink payday and everyone was on the piss, but I never bothered to take down the sign.

When we first drove into town, one thousand kilometres northwest of Cairns, the roads were dry as powdered bone and dust hung like smoke in our wake. When we left, six

months later, the roads were under water and impassable. When I arrived I listened intently as my council hosts and their construction worker friends offered up anecdote after endless anecdote, sensing that what they were trying to tell me lay in the intersection between stories, or the silences that topped and tailed them. When I left—no longer afraid to board the light plane, even though sheets of rain scudded across the runway, intent only on not missing the last flight out before Christmas—I knew that the day before it had been my turn to rave into the night, into the understanding ear of one of the nurses, as though I could explain my Aurukun experience … or at least had to try.

Stories, then, in line with the storytelling traditions shared up there by blacks and whites alike. So the story I heard was that Aurukun, population around 1200, was set up as a mission in 1901 by the Scottish Baptist minister Reverend McKenzie, who stole Aboriginal babies from the fifteen surrounding tribes and then invited their parents to fight him for them; he was a pugilist, apparently. If they won they could take back their children, if they lost they stayed and worked for him. Truth, they say, is stranger … When I hunted out some of the old fellas who'd met the man himself, who'd lived there when the sexes were separated, I was surprised to hear them speak of him with respect. More than surprised: shocked. They laughed and shook their heads slightly with something like fondness, or was it pride? 'He was a hard man,' they said, and joined in the celebrations of the town's annual festival: McKenzie Day.

It isn't easy to imagine Aurukun as a self-sustaining community with a functioning dairy and bakery; now the few jobs—at the post office, airport, council, tavern and general store—are almost all held by non-Indigenous Australians who've come from elsewhere, who've arrived by four-wheel-drive or plane or barge, along with everything else. The marriages Mr McKenzie made between children of warring factions have lasted better; today they're the elders called upon by the coppers when violence gets out of control. But of the diverse dialects once spoken, now only about six remain. Which still means you can meet local children whose mother tongue isn't English, children who I initially assumed were shy or quiet but eventually realised simply spoke a different language from me.

I hired a 'local facilitator' straight away—to help us communicate the program and me understand the situation. One day she came to help (apparently sent for by concerned women) when a big drunk guy was standing over me. She spoke to him in 'language', Wik, and succeeded in calming him down and sending him away. When I asked her what she'd said, she told me she'd promised that I'd give him back the money he'd signed over when he was sober to pay for his kids' lunches. I was furious, saying that I wasn't afraid and asking her how she could've given in to him, how she could've gone back on everything we were working so hard for.

'But he was gonna hit you,' she said.

I started this piece in a confessional mode, wanting to be upfront about how much time had passed since I was up north, or working for a company. Feeling that I had to make excuses for my lack of expertise. But I don't want to write about me, and I'm in no position to discuss issues in Indigenous welfare. My area of interest is still corporate Australia, seen through the keyhole of my own subjective experience. Having coined the term 'matrix' for the illusory, elusive and yet pervasive corporate world, I keep seeing ways in which that word works. It seems to me this matrix is ever-evolving and always extending itself through code(s) that need to be exposed. So please bear with me as I try and resist the urge to write my journey into a neat personal or political narrative.

Aurukun was an experience, and is an environment, too complex to sum up in an article, or even the many anecdotes heard by those who know me. It's taken me a very long time to even make this attempt, and the only reason why I am is M___'s parting request: 'You tell em how it is, girla.' But Noel Pearson has done that, told it well and told it often.

[My 'trip' was largely made possible by Pearson: as director of Cape York Partnerships he championed the Family Income Management (FIM) project I worked on, and as board member of the Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP), the not-for-profit organisation established to channel corporate and philanthropic resources into Indigenous development, he's been instrumental in getting corporations like the one I worked for involved in the crisis on the Cape.]

'We (Aboriginal people) have to be as forthright and unequivocal about our responsibilities as we are about our rights,' Pearson wrote in *Our Right to Take Responsibility*.[2] But the need for responsibility doesn't only rest with his people. Those actively involved in the kind of program I took part in would no doubt argue that we (non-Aboriginal people) must be just as forthright and unequivocal—just as direct, leaving just as little room for doubt or ambiguity. And, indeed, after spending time in Aurukun and encountering some of the extreme examples of social dysfunction manifest there—including widespread diabetes, foetal alcohol syndrome and even one alleged case of syphilis in a three-year-old—I believe he's absolutely right to issue such a call to action. I also believe that companies like the one I worked for are absolutely right to respond. My only reservation—and it is so very slight that I wonder if it's a reservation at all, perhaps more an observation—is that there doesn't seem to be much intellectual debate about this new philanthropy, its possible causes and probable effects. That's it, really: a desire for debate.

Can just writing and publishing this article be enough to clarify, and allay, my concern? Is it my right to write about it at all, given I know so little and was there for such a short time? (Presumably this isn't what M___ meant …) But I don't want to describe Aurukun, I'm not setting out to offer

some not-so-new insight into the appalling conditions on some of our remote communities, but to share my experience of the company secondments that seem to me to be a growing phenomenon; a new phase in the evolution of corporations.

It's worth asking whether this current form of corporate engagement is really new. Patronage, particularly of the arts and of individuals, has had a respected role throughout the world's histories, but that's not really the relationship developing here. Charity work and community service have a similarly strong tradition; yet, again, the description does not perfectly apply. (And if either of these models were apt, then that would raise other issues.) Pearson has said that the private sector has been approached for resources and support because the government has been slow to act. With their explicit emphasis on quantifiable outcomes and non-negotiable deadlines, such companies do seem to fit well with Pearson's objectives, but the parallel worries me: the idea of having recourse to institutions that we never voted for, that have their own agendas and—need it be spelt out?—embrace strongly economic values, seems to reflect the growing power of corporations, as pointed out in Naomi Klein's popular anti-globalisation manifesto *No Logo* and the more recent documentary *The Corporation*.[3]

And, remember, my decision to go to Aurukun arose out of my own disillusionment with the very world that I was now representing. It can hardly be surprising that I found myself wondering if the answer had to be so … capitalist. Most of the programs and projects I came into contact with on the Cape were variations on the 'teach a man to fish' theme. (Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.) But the variations were crucial. For example, the FIM logic went: a boat will give you something to do other than drink, and help you retain and develop a skill, and could provide you with food or even income; and wanting a boat will stop you spending your money on grog, and may even encourage you to get a job; and saving for a boat might involve your family or friends, reinforcing certain relationships and responsibilities as well as assisting in individual and communal goal-setting. And, as far as it went, it seemed to work. In fact, it seemed to work pretty well: we had families saving together for white goods, young men putting money away for four-wheel-drives, parents signing up to send some of their dole ('sit-down money') direct to the school to pay for food for their kids—although it's clearly questionable how much responsibility lasted beyond the initial decision, and just how much long-term or behavioural change was achieved.

What worried me, overall, wasn't the cars that were bought and then abandoned because they needed minor repairs, or were swept away in the wet; it wasn't the loans that were defaulted on; it wasn't even the number of older people who got their families to save together for headstones

for graves that had already been dug. It was the lack of transparency about where the savings were housed, which worried the locals too. Although that worry, perversely, could be seen as a sign that the program was succeeding: teaching the value of saving, and of money.

Perhaps current consumption practices (and the underlying assumption that you work to earn the money to buy the goods, and that this is worthwhile) do need to be taught, strange as the idea might be. After all, it's a core tenet of contemporary culture—Dictionary.com describes the word 'lifestyle' as 'implying categorisation based on habits of consumption'. It seemed to be a key difference when I contrasted Aurukun with the third-world villages I'd visited in South East Asia. (Which is not an uncommon comparison: I was told, anecdotally, that IEP was set up when the Body Shop took its 'Trade for Aid' program—which had worked in Africa and Asia—into Cape York and had it fail, for the first time.)

Regardless of their accuracy, my speculations were largely irrelevant, as was my scepticism, because—and this was a key principle of the secondment program I took part in—I was working on someone else's project: the FIM scheme had been developed by people with far more relevant experience and specialised knowledge than I had. I was simply a ring-in, doing what I could to help out. If most non-locals can be described as missionaries, mercenaries or misfits—as they are, and not just in jest—then we, the secondees, were clearly the hired help, contracted to work on already established programs such as FIM and Balkanu's Business Hubs. This approach was designed to guarantee the preservation and transmission of knowledge, as well as to ensure our roles had limited authority.

[It's worth noting that more, longer secondments have since been established with my old firm. Indeed, I was one of the first to take up an extended position having initially completed a standard one-month secondment at Mossman Gorge before being invited to apply for a five-month position at Aurukun—all the while salaried out of Sydney. Longer placements have obvious benefits in terms of continuity and commitment. Other consequences are harder to assess.]

— Finally, anecdotes

The thing is, corporate secondees provide far more than just business knowledge and expertise: they provide an example. As role models, colleagues, peers, or maybe even friends, they demonstrate values and attitudes that reflect the broader Australian community, which locals might otherwise not be exposed to (especially if remote communities are prone to attracting a notoriously disproportionate number of misfits and non-denominational missionaries). Pearson refers to it as 'leadership'. It's the kind of relationship that's taken for granted in environments like the one I grew up in.

'Where you goin', miss?' asked a group of teenage girls as I took my daily stroll around town. 'What your name, miss? How old you, miss?'
'How old d'you think I am?' I asked, stopping where they sat in the middle of the road where there was less dust and fewer mosquitos. They conferred, hiding their smiles behind their hands.
'Sixteen.'
'But I'm thirty!'
They shrieked with laughter, 'But you got no babies, miss!'

The exchange works both ways. Secondees also get the chance to be influenced and led; to be judged; to learn via contact with another culture, which is yet part of our own, with different people, with whom we share much more than just a common humanity. For those on either side there is the chance to see yourself, and where you've come from, from a different point of view. To see that ours is not the only reality, that ours might even be the mirror-world. Some secondees are so affected by their experience that they cannot continue as before: some, like me, go overseas, leave the business sector, refocus their career, or even, in one case, become a nun. Like Alice, we wake from our 'curious dream' wondering who dreamt it after all.

By the time we finally managed to arrange a fishing trip with our local FIM workers we were desperate to escape the claustrophobic town—it was mango season and tropical-heat-induced madness was on the rise—but it was mid-morning before we'd hunted down a boat. It was only when I was wading out into the piss-warm water that it occurred to me we were launching the tinny off the very same landing where only a couple of nights before the cops had pointed out a three-and-a-half-metre crocodile that wasn't quite big enough to cage. When I mentioned this to the locals they laughed, agreeing that I had every reason to be afraid:

'You look like big fat fish belly,' they teased, turning the boat towards the mouth of the river and climbing in. 'We slip through the water like shadows.'

As time passes and short-term details give way to the broader brush strokes of long-term memory, I find that what I remember most about then is the sense of time: time slowing down, time stretching out—like the long summer days of school holidays when I was a kid. Downtime, dreamtime. When we first arrived in Aurukun the Aborigines laughed at us for walking so fast. We soon learnt that there was nowhere to go and no time when you had to get there.

When one of the old men died towards the end of our stay we didn't even think to ask what hour the funeral was; we just showed up on the day and sat outside the church, making circles in the dirt with our swinging feet as we waited, wordlessly, nothing left to say to each other.

I wanted to write about my Aurukun experience while I was still there, but I just couldn't get my head around it. There was too much to try and fit in; the issues were too huge, my responses too contradictory. Already I could hardly remember the old-me that I supposed should be my ideal reader. And I wasn't even planning to touch on the horrific five-dog attack that my colleague suffered, or the complicated relationships we negotiated with the tight-knit cliques of construction workers and coppers. But when I tried to start I ended up writing about life 'inside the Matrix'—presumably because it's so much easier to see where you've been once you've left. (And only now that I'm so-long 'back', can I write of the Cape.)

The thing is, I initially wanted to explore the incentives underlying such secondment programs—how they offer a point of difference for companies: improve staff morale in these days of little loyalty and unreliable bonuses; establish a profile for both the firm and its internal sponsor via coverage on, say, *Australian Story*; satisfy stakeholders' growing interest in ethical investments. And I wanted to confess my own motives too: about how, in retrospect, I could see I'd already decided to leave the company and this was a way of easing myself out. At best, I wanted to explain how and why something worked. At worst I wanted to expose the underbelly of this latest charitable trend that, it seemed to me, was a little more than what was usually expected when the corporate buzzword 'social responsibility' was heard.

But how much do motives matter? Isn't that Pearson's point? That when the issue at stake is the current state of Aboriginal Australia, and dysfunctional communities like Aurukun, the sense of urgency required to effect change is such that other arguments need to be put on hold—although perhaps not laid aside. Results are what are needed, and corporate Australia has the expertise and ability (and inclination, for whatever reason) to deliver.

It's a partnership that may already be making a difference. Many I met on the Cape bewailed the number of government researchers who arrive every year to write reports that rarely result in practical programs, and believed politics dominates more decision-making than just the big ticket items. Here, secondments aren't just dollars in a donation box; they're a very real contribution that's hard work at a strategic, administrative and individual level. I thought looking back would stir up all sorts of feelings of apprehension about these programs, and yet I find myself powerfully persuaded in their favour, albeit in a somewhat fatalistic way. And I refuse to believe that that is simply a sign of what a consummate business professional I became.

For all my attempts at cultural sensitivity I was always making a fool of myself: asking teenagers what they were doing next weekend when there was nothing to do any weekend and little way

to distinguish between days; asking couples how they met when they had known each other all their lives; even reading out a letter that included the name of someone who had recently died.

'Don' worry, girla,' I was laughingly assured, 'he won' be turnin' round for you.'

Regardless of the original motives of those involved (whether company or individual, intern or host), the power of these secondments, for better or worse, is that their effect cannot be completely predicted or completely controlled. However much organisers might attempt to measure and summarise the results of such programs—in terms of staff retention or community developments—at the end of the day it is (all) the participants who have the opportunity to be changed by the personal and professional contact. And take that change back to our communities. The larger plan is less interesting, and less important perhaps, than the small moments that constitute it. And for these moments to retain their power they need to remain intact as anecdotes that resist even as they invite interpretation.

Author's note

This article was written two years ago. Things have happened since then that could barely be predicted: Aurukun has been much in the news, and Noel Pearson; even the woman I worked with who told me to 'tell it like it is'. And I've thought a lot about whether, in writing about my time on Cape York and the question of a different kind of intervention, I evaded the issue(s) that have since received so much attention—and if so, why. As I note: a lot of stories circulate in such communities that are hard to believe, though that certainly doesn't mean they aren't true. My own experience was, and is, so extremely limited … in time and depth … I kept asking myself: What did I really know? But what do we, really?

In the end, I'm not sure whether this addendum is an apology or a defence. What I said still stands but, unfortunately, and for now anyway, so does everything I didn't.

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1. 'Inside the Matrix: The (Un)reality of Corporate Life', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, November 2003.
2. Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Noel Pearson and Associates, Cairns, 2000.
3. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Flamingo, London, 2000. *The Corporation*, dir. Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, 2003.