

Challenging the Beautiful People at a School Ball: An Ethnographic Portrait

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Abstract

In Western Australia over the past two decades the annual ball has become a major feature of the calendar of most high schools. Enormous amounts of time and money are spent on both personal appearance and organising the activities associated with the event. An assignment set as part of a Year 12 English class asking students to describe and analyse the cultural groups in their cohort revealed a concern among the students about what some described as the ‘beautiful people’, a group of students that centred on several of the female students who were judged to be amongst the prettiest in Year 12. The ‘beautiful people’ organised and ran the school ball, but the students on the fringes of this central group decided that they were not simply going to go along with the norms set by the organisers. Rich ethnographic description is the main aim of this paper, which raises questions about the utility of the concept of resistance for sociological research in schools and beyond.

Keywords: Ethnography, sociology of education, resistance, school formals, critical theory, anthropology of eEducation

The annual ball for final year students (Year 12) is now almost universal in Western Australian high schools. It is also widespread in Australia and in other parts of the Anglophone world. This paper focuses mainly on reporting what I observed at such an event, which happened to be the final evening of the fieldwork I conducted at the government school in which I conducted fifteen months of ethnographic research in the late 1990s. I have come to call the school Ravina High (see Forsey 2007a). Avoiding the ‘rush to theory’ (Christian 1987) that characterises much of the self-proclaimed criticalist research, particularly ethnographic literature (Goodman 1998), I focus most of my attention here on ethnographic description. By way of summary I offer some thoughts on the usefulness for explaining what I witnessed on the evening in question as a form of resistance – an important conceptual tool which has been subject to much critical scrutiny for the best part of three decades in sociology and

beyond (see for example Cohen 1980; Hargreaves 1982; Walker 1986; Fernandes 1988; McFadden 1995; Davies 1994; Munns & McFadden 2000; Raby 2005).

Going to the Ball

A school ball brings obvious enjoyment to many of those who participate. It also provides an opportunity for young people to express their taste and sophistication, and to show that they can start taking their place as stylish, urbane adults in the world beyond school. But for some it is a time when their social awkwardness is magnified yet another degree. In other words the school ball can be yet another time when the complex politics and hierarchies of individual status and social class are on display, when the ritual humiliations associated with this are extended beyond a school's quadrangles and yards.

The ball for students at Ravina High was a little unusual in that it was entirely run by students and their parents. Teachers were barely involved in the event; the principal did not show her face at either of the balls I attended during my time at Ravina High. Those few that attended paid for their own tickets, albeit at a subsidised rate. They were not involved in any surveillance of students on the night and played no part in the ritual activities of the evening. Instead the ball was controlled by a small committee of students, which in 1999 comprised three Year 12 girls, each of whom sat in the centre of an informal group that was commonly referred to as 'the popular group'. They chose to call the event 'The Dream Ball'.

I came to know about the event from a variety of sources, but mainly through interviews conducted with a group of Year 12 students in the week leading up to the event. The students were all in an English class for which, as one of the research techniques employed in my fieldwork, I helped devise an assignment that required the

students to imagine writing two feature articles informing readers about the cultural groups in their Year 12 cohort. It was through this activity that Cindy alerted me to attempts to upset the hegemonic power of the popular group.

Cindy's article titled "Ravina Place, 6152" focused on the fashion sense, the internal conflicts and the social power of the dominant group which, in her words, was comprised of 'little rich girls and cool macho boys'. Likening what she saw going on amongst this particular group with 'Melrose Place', an American soap opera that was popular at the time, she described a group of girls who wore 'only the trendiest clothes', 'short A-line skirts with regulation splits up the side', tops that were designed to show off their newly acquired navel rings, and 'strappy shoes'. Cindy observed that in the popular group the girls in particular were beset with internal conflict that erupted into 'back stabbing bitchiness and betrayal' when they sat down in small sub-sets of the main group. She also noted that at the parties which this particular group 'lived for', the girls control the event in various ways, and which was most evident in their 'hogging of the stereo' in a manner that forced the rest of the party-goers to listen to their music.

I interviewed Cindy a fortnight after she had submitted the assignment, which was eight days before the ball. She made it very clear in the interview that the so-called beautiful girls controlled the social life of the Year group. She refused to use the term popular to describe what she called the main group, mainly because 'everyone is popular in their own group'. She then went on to highlight the influence of what she referred to as 'the modelly group' on key social events such as the ball. 'They have control over most things' she said. The conversation continued as follows:

C: I was talking to one of the girls and asking why the ball was so early, why is it in April? And she said, 'because I want it to be' (said emphatically).

'Okay', I thought. But that's what she said, because I want it to be, or otherwise it will be too cold or something.

M (Interviewer): too cold for the clothes that we want to wear, that is what I have sort of heard.

C: Yes, but it was them that decided it. They didn't get any input from anyone else. It was them that decided.

M: and it is the girls who are controlling the ball?

R: Oh yeah.

When I said that I had 'sort of heard' that those organising the ball did not want to hold the ball in the middle of winter, I was being somewhat disingenuous as I had heard this directly from one of the three young women who had taken responsibility for organising the event. Louise, the organiser, was an aspiring designer and she was very conscious of wanting to wear a gown of her own fashioning to what she had dubbed 'The Dream Ball'. In Louise's mind the event was to be marked by 'classy' gowns and tuxedos. But some of her peers had other ideas and it was during the interview with Cindy that I began to hear about these alternative plans.

Cindy informed me that she was going dressed as a vampire and that instead of hiring a limousine as most of her classmates were doing, she was going to travel by train into the city centre where the ball was being held at one of the five star hotels located there. She commented on how at the previous ball a number of students had come dressed in different sort of clothing and 'this year it is very scary', she said, 'no-one was going as a joke'. So Cindy had decided that she going to do just that. A few days later Vince, who had written in the assignment of the acceptance he had found in Year 12 among a small group of non-conformist girls, informed me that he had hired a

wedding dress as his garment for the night. 'People already think I am gay', he told me, 'and this should keep them guessing'. My ethnographic appetite had been whetted. It was going to be an interesting evening.

At The Dream Ball

Vince was the first person I noticed when I walked from the stairs leading to the front foyer of the Hyatt Hotel. True to his word he was in a wedding dress complete with a veil draped over his shoulder length hair. His greeting was enthusiastic, he posed for a photograph with me, commented on how much he was looking forward to seeing what sort of reaction his appearance delivered and then rejoined the throng. I hovered around the foyer for some ten minutes or so watching the sixteen and seventeen year olds climb out of the elongated cars they had hired to bring them to the venue in style, while others slipped in through the side entrance having been dropped off by their parents and older brothers and sisters. The excitement was palpable, especially from the young women who were busily greeting each other with hasty pecks on the cheek while commenting somewhat shrilly on how gorgeous their friend looked. Four of the girls I had spoken with in the days leading up to the event had each spent upwards of AU\$700 on the various essentials and accoutrements for the evening, and as one should expect when so much money is spent on dresses and shoes and accessories, it was a very glamorous scene. I searched for Cindy amidst amidst the taffeta and silk, the tuxedos and patent leather shoes but could not find her.

The tables were arranged in a three deep horseshoe around the edge of the large dance floor. I was allocated to the teachers' table, which not surprisingly was on the fringes of the horseshoe, a short stroll from the entrance. It was there that I saw Cindy with her black suit, red cape and prominent plastic incisors inserted in her mouth at a table

to the right of where I was sitting. I went to greet her and she informed me that the train trip was enjoyable. Cindy was also looking forward to the evening; there was a glint in her eye when she suggested to me that it will be interesting to see how things unfold.

I then walked over to the other side of the horseshoe, which is where most of the crowd were gathered. In contrast to where I had just come from there was a real buzz of excitement and noise on that side of the ballroom. When I got there I saw that there was a side room in which a professional photographer had a camera set up on a tripod and already he had groups of people lining up to have their photographs taken. Louise, the organiser, was seated close the photography room. She was surrounded mainly by young women commending her for the elegance of her dress and the beauty of the room. I hovered there for a few moments before taking the opportunity offered by a slight break in the stream heading Louise's way to add my congratulations, to ask how things were going in terms of the organisation, and to see if there was any assistance I could offer. She thanked me, commented that she was very happy with the way it all had turned out and then asked me if I wouldn't mind counting the votes for bell and beau of the ball. Picking up one of the A5 sized voting slips near to hand she informed that these sheets had been distributed to every table around the room. It read as follows:

Ravina Ball 99

Remember, when voting, you may only vote for year 12's attending Ravina's Ball. Every vote counts, so choose the best and have a wicked night!!!!

Beau of the Ball

Bell of the Ball

Most Outrageous Person

Best Couple

Naturally, I agreed to assist with this crucial task.

The band started playing, people started dancing, the photographer's flash continued to whirl around us. In turn we ate the buffet meal, the teachers and I drank a few wines together, I circulated as best I could among the group and began to hear from Cindy about a plan that had been forming among her friends to manipulate the votes for the beau and belle of the ball. 'We've been going round the tables Martin and picking up the free voting slips', she told me, 'they are all so distracted by photographs and telling each other how lovely they are, they don't even notice'. Cindy let me know that they were making sure that girls from their group won the awards, including the best couple. She informed me that two of the females sitting on their side of the horseshoe had decided to come together and they were voting for them as the best couple. I did not ask if the pair were an actual couple but I was given the impression that they had made the choice to be each other's date for the night because this was easier, and more fun, than finding a male partner to bring along. They were also making sure that Vince won the most outrageous award, but both Cindy and I agreed that he did not need much assistance with this. Cindy also let me know that some of her friends were keen on making a guy they thought was 'pretty hot' the Beau of the Ball. Fernando was his name. I had not met him and asked the obvious question. Cindy pointed off into the distance, towards the dark spaces behind me and said, 'he's over there. He's one the Asian guys. I think he's Indonesian and you should see him, he's gorgeous'. I mentioned to her that I was counting the votes and that I looked forward to seeing how this unfolded.

Cindy and her friends were enormously successful vote riggers. One of the girls from their group received nineteen votes for Belle of the Ball. Her nearest 'rival', from the

popular group, had four votes. The two girls that Cindy had pointed out to me also received nineteen nominations in the Best Couple election and easily won this category. Vince was the overwhelming choice as the Most Outrageous and Fernando just pipped Spike, who was also on the fringes of the Year 12 cohort, for the Beau of the Ball. I handed the results to Louise about fifteen minutes before the results were due to be announced, returned to my table and waited to see the effects of the count.

Louise was clearly perplexed. She came over to talk to me twice. In the first instance she wanted to confirm that the results were accurate. I showed the voting slips and assured her that they were. She was speechless. I said nothing of what I knew about the voting procedure. The second time she came to me she looked a little embarrassed. 'Who is this Fernando?' she asked me. I pointed in the direction of the Asian students who were gathered at the back of the horseshoe, informed her that he was one of the Indonesian guys, and that I had not met him so could not introduce her to him. Louise's brow was slightly furrowed as she walked back to her table but the votes were in and shortly afterwards she announced the winners. Afterwards Cindy came to me with a triumphant look in her eyes. 'Wasn't that great' she declared and then thanked me for my help.

I have no idea of the effects on the overall group of the news that one of the fringe females was Belle of the Ball, that two of the girls from the edges were judged to be the couple of the ball, and that one of the Asian students was Beau of the Ball. There was no visible shock, no boos or catcalls, no great sense of surprise. As soon as the award ceremony was completed the band struck their chords and the dancing continued with renewed vigour. Only some of us knew the details of what had just happened. I saw it as a minor triumph for Cindy and her friends; I wrote a quick note about 'the unpopular ones winning' and of 'the normal power base being ignored and

divided' and then I joined the crowd on the dance floor. It was a night of fun for me in various ways, a neat way to finish off my fieldwork.

Playful Resistance and Subversive Agency

What are we to make of a story like this? While resistance studies are not as fashionable as they were in the 1970s and 80s, a legacy perhaps of its modernist roots (Raby 2005), what I witnessed at the Dream Ball can be productively analysed as a form of resistance to the politics of the school yard. It seems an obvious choice to make. However, in considering how resistance is mobilised by social scientists, particularly educational ethnographers, I argue for the need to use the term with more conceptual rigour and less wishful thinking and dreamy speculation than is evident in much of the self-proclaimed critical ethnographic studies of schooling (see Forsey 2007).

In her review of resistance literature in youth studies Raby (2005:151) asserts that despite the ambiguities and doubts surrounding the concept, resistance remains a useful analytical tool, not only because it 'recognizes and values oppositional behavior as political and informed' (see also Giroux 1983), it also helps acknowledge 'various levels of politics and change in a wide range of young people's actions' (Raby 2005:169). I am less convinced by Raby's appeal to the politically informed nature of resistance studies than I am by the focus on variety and range in the behaviour of individuals located in particular collectivities. Locating politically aware oppositional youth in school settings usually says more about the wishful thinking of the researcher than it does about the lived realities of the researched (Davies 1995; Shweder 2001); whereas, focusing on the different levels of awareness and the range of behavioural responses to dominant ideas and practices, provides us with a more

authentic and more effective means for portraying social action (Goodman 1998; Deeds-Ermath 2001). As much as she was resisting the domination of “the beautiful people”, Cindy, along with her friends, was being very playful and spontaneous. She was exercising her agency in a variety of ways.

Structured agency, what Giddens (1979) calls ‘structuration’, is a more useful conceptual tool to work with as it encompasses resistance, but does not limit human activity to simple acts of resistance or compliance. Structured agency is part of our every living moment (Forsey In Press), and it is as much about ‘reciprocity, altruism and the creative power of the imagination’ as it is about domination and subordination (Brown, 1996, p.734). It is also about ordinariness and insularity, pettiness and merriment, greed and love – about the tender intervals spreading beyond the continuum between domination and cooperation, into a second dimension of complex conceptual space. As Deeds-Ermath (2001:48) suggests of this sort of subjectivity, it is not the basis for a mission statement or any sort of grand vision of action, and progress. Rather it is a smaller, humbler, less passive, more creative, more universal and possibly it is even more effective than an orientation to the world that seeks to find resistance in subjugated persons wherever possible. What I witnessed on the final night of my fieldwork was an act of playful resistance *and* subversive agency. It was also a whole lot more than that. What is required in sociological accounts of educational processes, and of human action in general, is a greater commitment to the educative value brought by authentic portrayal of social scenes than is evident in the reports guided by the rush to critical theory that is ironically hegemonic in much of the sociological corpus (see Goodman 1998 and Christian 1987).

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