

Tales from the Field ~ Let the wild rumpus start!

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Tales from the Field ~ *Let the wild rumpus start!*[1]

Paul [2]: Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps we (being your case studies) have altered our identities to your desired outcome? Or perhaps that the mere act of studying us has forced us to adapt our outward personae?



Introduction

This paper draws upon research data from a two year, open-ended ethnographic study of a group of young people in their final years of high school in one of Australia's capital cities. Following the paper's title, I have included a quote from one of my student participants. It aptly illustrates the level of insightful engagement with my research that these young people consistently demonstrated. In its entirety, this study interrogates deficit models of youth (Epstein, 1998; Quijada, 2008; White & Wyn, 2008) and invites reflection upon the ways in which we seek to educate them within the hierarchical structures of institutional power relations. However, for purposes of this relatively brief paper, I focus upon just two aspects of the project: the complexities and challenges of educational ethnography; and, its worth as a methodology suited to youth research.

Ethnographic research does not seek to generalize, but rather aims to engage with "the wild profusion of existing things" (Foucault, 1970, p. xv) so that the data may 'speak' the concepts grounded within. As such, it invites a multidirectional dialogue among research participants, readers and the researcher (Brewer, 2000; Behar, 2003) that focuses on "reflexivity, i.e. 'stories from the field' that show the social processes and especially the actions of the researcher that impinge upon and contribute to the 'construction' of data" (McNeill and Chapman, 2005, p. 100).

Via a sampling of student texts such as interview narratives, poetry, essays, reflections, emails and artistic works, this paper highlights the strength of

ethnographic methods for mining the depths of data rich in the particularities that engender questions about broader social processes, practices and assumptions. As

Thomas (1993) notes:

The core of critical ethnography is the study of the process of domestication and social entrapment by which we are made content with our life conditions. ... Critical Ethnography takes seemingly mundane events, even repulsive ones, and reproduces them in a way that exposes broader social processes of control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others (pp. 7-9).

As such, educational ethnography is a methodology that has a vitally important role to play in the struggle for social justice in schools.

The following discussion proceeds through two main sections: the first part explores the research context and the challenges I encountered; and the second part presents a selection of data that demonstrate the variety, richness and depth of material that flowed from the ethnographic processes employed. I have further subdivided this data to exemplify two of the dominant themes that emerged: *Romanticism* and *Alienation*.

Situating the research

People and places

Hoffman State High School is situated in a major metropolitan area of Australia's subtropical state of Queensland. Largely middle class and multicultural, the school lies very close to a major university and draws a significant number of its students from the families who staff it. This has ensured a continuing thread of progressiveness that led to the demise of school uniforms in the 1970s and an ethos founded upon traditions of a socially aware student body. The selection of research participants was shaped by their availability. I was a practising secondary teacher at the time I started my research [3] and I issued invitations to students in my Year 11 Modern History and English classes. Having obtained ethical clearance and permission from school

administrators, I approached students and their parents and explained the rationale for my research. The thirty-two students [4] who volunteered for my study were largely ‘typical’ Hoffman High students in terms of their varying levels of adherence to alternative perspectives. The sub-group of twenty-two from whom I derived most data were distinctive by the particular closeness of their relationships, their propensity for student activism and the ways in which they supported each other intellectually.

Questioning popular assumptions

My approach to this study was driven by the belief that current research into youth needs to be situated within the complexity of contemporary social, cultural and economic changes. Approaching one’s participants as already constructed subjects of the discourses of, for example, class, racism or gender (Willis, 1977; Walker, 1988; McRobbie, 1978) is perhaps more fitting for less fluid global landscapes (Castells, 1996; Hall, 1996). Not only do we risk essentializing the experiences of individuals within the contested category of ‘youth’ (Kincheloe and McLean, 1994), but it is also problematic within alleged contemporary impulses towards a state of *multiphrenia* – a term used by psychologists such as Kenneth Gergen (1996) to describe the condition of the postmodern individual:

... a member of many communities and networks, a participant in many discourses, an audience to messages from everybody and everywhere – messages that present conflicting ideals and norms and images of the world (p. 9).

Thus, according to current theory, imposed, socially constructed boundaries are being challenged by new modes of identity building based upon choice, fluidity and hybridity (Lyotard, 1984; Harvey, 1989; Hall, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999; Dolby and Rizvi, 2008; Lechner and Boli, 2008). Such an environment is aptly described by eminent cultural critic Henry Giroux (1994) as:

A world with few secure psychological, economic or intellectual markers (in which) young people ... wander within and between multiple borders and spaces marked by excess, otherness and difference. This is a world in which old certainties are ruptured and meaning becomes more contingent, less indebted to the dictates of established truth. While the circumstances of youth may vary across and within terrains marked by racial and class differences, the modernist world of certainty and order that has traditionally policed, contained, and insulated such difference has given way to a shared postmodern culture in which representational borders collapse into new hybridised forms of cultural performance, identity and political agency (Giroux, 1994, pp. 287-8).

It was within this uncertain terrain that I sought the perspectives and life-stories of my student participants. Narratives, constructed within the genres of interviews, poetry, prose, e-mails and discussions provided most of the data for this research. The next sub-section explores the manner in which these narratives were obtained and the resulting challenges engendered within the school context.

Doing educational ethnography

Ethnography has a powerful, if somewhat intermittent presence in the history of educational research. From Paul Willis' (1977) foundational study, *Learning to Labour*, to Stephen Ball's (2003) study of middle class advantage to McLeod & Yates (2006) recent longitudinal research into Australian youth, ethnography's contribution to understanding socio-educational processes is clearly evident. However, it is also arguable that within the recent decades of economic rationalist management regimes, coupled with the intensification of academic workloads and pressure from funding authorities for "results" and "quick fixes", the time required for immersive ethnography has continued to retract (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). Yet, given its grounded nature, it is the very methodological approach that is most suited to the marginalised and silenced of society.

Like other categorized subjects, I believe that youth are subject to experiences of powerful stereotyping. Young people are defined by, and in relation to, adults – "a deficit of the adult state" (Wyn and White, 1997, p. 11) – and thus may be seen as

colonized, controlled and silenced by the normalized and institutionalised power relations that many adults attempt to impose upon the young. Regarded as needing surveillance, guidance and expert care, youth are defined, constructed, spoken about, and spoken for, by adults (McGregor, 2000). These are *narratives of power* purporting to represent the ‘truth’ of *others* and, as such, need to be challenged by the individual stories of those who are silenced by ‘authority’ and ‘expert’ opinion. Within the context of schools, such effects are magnified via the traditional hierarchical power relations of these institutions. I wanted my student participants to ‘talk back’ to me in counter-narratives of their own making.

To include *the Other* in co-authorship necessitates a focus on self-representation via a range of texts so that the researcher performs the role of an intermediary between the subject and the audience. Yet even in this model, we must acknowledge power differentials between researchers and the researched (Pole and Morrison, 2003). Only by disrupting the powerful assumptions of adultism (Leach, 1994) during the research process, will young people be able to participate in the construction their own representations. To that end, I believe that a feminist emphasis on closeness, immersion, empathy and narrative (Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992) was vitally important to the successful generation of data in this youth oriented research.

Processes of self-narrative involve the creation of social worlds in which the story-teller has a narrative position and draws upon a variety of resources situated within particular narrative contexts (Holstein and Jaber, 1997). Above all, it is always *constructive* and mostly *collaborative*, either with peers or the researcher. In this research I adopted the poststructural position that ‘meaning’ is socially constituted and ‘knowledge’ is generated from those actions that are used to obtain it (Holstein and Jaber, 1997). As Mishler notes (1991), the problem in making meaning with

language arises from the fact that such a relationship is “contextually grounded, unstable, ambiguous, and subject to endless reinterpretation” (cited in Scheurich, 1997, p. 62). Therefore, I wish to emphasise that in using narratives, I do not claim them as ‘truths’ but offer them as tentative representations which may provide some access to the meanings my students constructed – *with* and *for* me - of their identities and experiences. I did not just gather data, but, unavoidably, also generated it within our many encounters. The highly individual texts created during the research were not intended as data that could be used to generalize. As Miller and Glassner (1997) observe, “(Qualitative) research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds” (p. 100). Drawing on the ideas of Russian intellectual, Mikhail Bakhtin (Clark and Holquist, 1984) my aim was to engage my students in *dialogic narratives* in collaborative exercises of ‘meaning-making’.

Reviewers regard Bakhtin as something of an enigma and find his views difficult to contain in a single definition. Given his emphasis on existence as a state of *becoming* rather than *arriving*, however, this is hardly surprising. In terms of my own work, it was within the spaces of Bakhtin’s theories that I was finally able to articulate the type of discursive encounters I needed for this research. He conceived of *dialogue*, not just as two people conversing, but as:

The extensive set of conditions that are immediately modelled in any actual exchange..... but not exhausted in such an exchange dialogue means communication between simultaneous differences (cited in Clark and Holquist, 1984, p. 9).

Thus dialogues constitute both cognitive and social practices of mutual exchanges situated *within* difference, not in dialectical opposition to it. According to Bakhtin, dialogue comprises ‘utterances’, or points of view that signify, not a *position*, but a *process* that is never finalised. He defines such utterances as the means by which we

navigate our journeys through the twin forces of difference and unity/sameness (Clark and Holquist, 1984). As a positionally powerful adult-teacher-researcher, this conceptual framework helped to shape the nature of my journey with the student participants.

As consent forms were returned, I began conducting interviews with participants. As well as organizing lunch-time interviews and discussions, I made extensive notes on a regular basis and collected students' poetry, prose and e-mail correspondence. I also encouraged students to submit a variety of interesting artefacts such as photographs and artworks. Because my professional responsibilities positioned me as a component of the schooling 'system', in order to engage the trust of my student participants, I had to establish a 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1996) that would facilitate the disruption of the teacher/student oppositional binary. Soja's thirdspace describes such a positioning as simultaneously 'insider', 'outsider', both and neither – perhaps the inevitable site of postmodern research, a space not easy to occupy and full of ambiguous moments. In the words of feminist writer Gillian Rose (1993) I wanted to “explore the possibility of a space which does not replicate the exclusions of the Same and the Other” (cited in Soja, 1996, p. 123). Therefore, I began to leave my classroom (D2) unlocked so that they could use it at lunch-time for meetings or socialising.

Over time D2 became a physical manifestation of that thirdspace of interaction I was seeking. It facilitated an area of interaction within which students could engage in practices forbidden, or difficult to achieve, or frowned upon outside its walls. Such practices included calling a teacher by her first name; brewing coffee and free and open discussion of issues that concerned them. This could be done in a relaxed context that allowed for the playing of guitars or CDs. Whilst not revolutionary, such

freedoms are surprisingly rare within mainstream, traditionally run schools. Students could meet in classrooms only if a teacher was present, and food and drink were not allowed. Consequently, the students' use of my classroom became the focus of increasing criticism from my colleagues. However, I persisted in this practice because as noted by Foucault (1980), having 'space' may be an empowering thing:

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat. Institutional architecture of the classroom ... (p. 149)

The next section draws directly upon the data to construct a brief pastiche of the nature of this research space and how it served as a context for many of our encounters.

Notes from the field

1. From my notebook... ..

D2 is my – our - classroom...but lately it has become something else. Its walls are still regulation Education Qld cream...the carpet brown....there are bars on the windows (to protect AV equipment)Blue-grey vertical blinds and matching desks with moulded plastic chairs (quite accidental this unity in colour scheme – there are few aesthetic considerations when it comes to furnishing classrooms)...and...now... about thirty brightly coloured t-shirts hanging from the bars... 'Love Your Body the Way it Is' they wave triumphantly in the breeze...courtesy of the student run Social Justice and Equity Group...the remnants of Body Rights Week – grudgingly supported by the school administration but widely acclaimed by students.... On the back wall are two large, brown noticeboards covered in posters Poetry flows around the walls on coloured sheets of red and green. as a defining statement about my attitudes towards authoritarianism, injustice and agency.



In the corner of the room stands a filing cabinet...unpretentious grey, stocked with the results of their whole-school survey and a myriad of other material on sexuality, homophobia, sexism, police powers, discrimination...racism...it is their cabinet, in their space for organization.... (School rules require that all classrooms are locked at lunch time. There is no student common room.) As I go, I leave the door unlocked...they smile, enter and hold their meetings. Sometimes I attend but try to stand back it is their group (Teacher query: Who's the teacher in charge, Missy?.....We don't have one....)...they welcome me into our shared spaces...(Students are forbidden to enter staff rooms.....two years ago one Deputy Principal made a special trip to my staff room to evict two students who were sitting inside chatting to teachers over lunch)..... Across the top of the blackboard are the words ~ Education not Indoctrination...Just above this is a sticker from Stanford University, courtesy of Cornell:

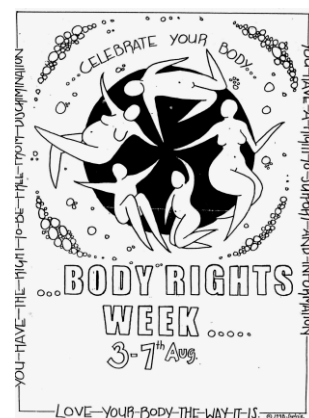


Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes. Sometimes people bring guitars and bongos to D2...they sit in a circle on the floor and play around with chords, Dylan ...Beatles....snatches of songs that no one has quite mastered yet....sometimes I brew coffee for them...we sit and chat about music and life and whatever has happened that day (We couldn't find you at lunch – where were you?)...**Paul:** Do you – Do you cop flack for letting us in here? **Glenda:** Ummm...well, I think they're getting used to my 'eccentricities' these days...(laughter).....

For the development of the students' sense of agency, having this thirdspace provided an area from which to challenge hegemonic discourses in counter-dialogues of their own. As Grossberg (1996) notes:

Agency ... is defined by the articulations of subject positions and identities into specific places and spaces ... Agency is the empowerment enabled at particular sites along particular vectors (p. 102).

It was in this room that the Social Justice and Equity Group (to which most of my participants belonged) would meet. The student-run Social Justice and Equity Group had been a traditional student body at the school. Each year its causes depended upon the interests of the students and the 'tolerance' of the school administrators. Many of my



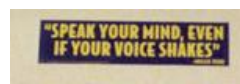
participants belonged to this group and during my two years of research pushed boundaries within the school by addressing issues around Gay Rights and homophobia. Having access to my classroom provided a 'safe space' for intellectual exploration and activism as illustrated in the following reflections.

2. Student perceptions.....

Ken's reflections:

I started to ponder over which was better, saving the world from the painful grasps of oppression and mental slavery or an okay lunchtime with friends Walking into D2 I felt slightly intimidated by all the bright and confident people already seated ... Sitting down in a chair I listened to what everyone else was talking about. I decided that, although everyone was open to my suggestions, I would take a half-hearted approach to liberation.

I can't remember how it happened, but after a while I realized that I had suddenly become a part of this group and we were starting to get some focus. The group, after compiling a school wide survey, decided we should have a Body Rights Week, five days of celebrating our differences and liberating ourselves from the oppression of others' expectations. There were food stalls, information stalls, speakers,



workshops and even a belly dancer named Princess Shahara! It was amazing to see the school so open-minded and I felt like we had achieved a mini utopian society.

I think that if I had not walked into D2 that day, maybe I would not know as many interesting people as I do now and maybe I would not understand these issues as much as I do. Throughout the year, from being in the Social Justice and Equity Group, I feel that it has opened a doorway of increased awareness of myself, others and ways to address issues within not only our school but society in general.

Neal's D2 Poem

Throbbing warmth of conversation and yellow light
Where outside it is cold and grey.
Laughing – discussing youthful dreams + learning
Literature, music – busy social point.
Classroom but also place of space.
People live here + experience + grow + learn
And from this Power is derived.
And tho some may be intimidated,
Many learn + enjoy + gain.
And thus from the piles of coffee in the corner
D2 is a garden to many romantic aspirations –
A hotbed of dreams.....



My presence was accepted by the students regardless of what they were doing, and sometimes if I did not join them because of other commitments they would ask me where I'd been. My approach was to employ egalitarian research methods and thereby attempt to engender "a true dialogue rather than an interrogation allowing participants to become *co-researchers*" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 33). However, herein lies the dilemma for teachers who undertake ethnographic research within the contexts of their own schools. Providing my student participants with such a space as D2 facilitated discussion, questioning and activism that clashed with the traditional power relations of the teacher/student binary. The ensuing tensions that erupted between me and my colleagues are explored in the next section.

'Things fall apart...'[5] ~ teacher-researcher tensions

As a feminist researcher, I believe that useful data needs to be generated within the context of close and trusting relationships between the researcher and the researched. If I had maintained the officially preferred 'distance' of teacher and student they would have revealed very little of themselves and therein lies the basis of the conflicts

that dogged me during the final year of data generation. As ‘Glenda’ (not, the institutionally mandated ‘Ms McGregor’) I became privy to attitudes and behaviour hidden from most other adults. My closeness to the group challenged the institutional status quo. It destabilised power relations within the school and made some teachers either resentful or uncomfortable or both - to the degree that they made complaints about the situation to the principal. The identities of those staff members were protected by the administration so I was never able to discuss the issues directly with them. One such issue concerned the fact that as the research progressed and I came to know a number of the students and their parents very well, occasionally, I would meet them in one of the local coffee shops after school. The change in location usually provided for more open discussions and allowed me to observe them outside of the school environment.

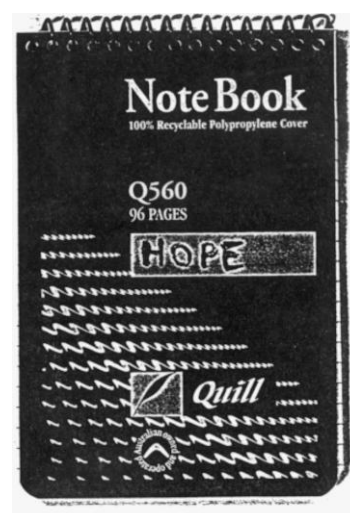
These meetings were acknowledged by the students’ families and I believe that such practices are a normal aspect of ethnographic research (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003; Pole and Morrison, 2003). However, despite the freely distributed information about my research that I continued to supply, disquiet amongst my colleagues continued. Adding to the tension was the fact that many of the students in my research group had a history of friction with some teachers and administrators and during the course of my research their conflicts came to be linked to *my* association with them. Thus, at the end of my two years of data gathering, despite a student and parent petition to education authorities to retain my services, I was transferred to a neighbouring school. On the surface it was defended as a routine part of staffing distribution within the district, however, unofficially it was common knowledge that the school principal had requested it.

Thus at the conclusion of my project, as a teacher-researcher, I felt professionally compromised and personally drained by the on-site conflicts engendered by my project. I believe that unless institutional gatekeepers ensure supportive contexts for teacher-researchers, future educational ethnographic endeavours will continue to be severely compromised by the restrictions placed upon them by local principals and staff cultures. However, this is not to deny the richness of the data that I gathered/generated and I now present some of the outcomes of this research organised under two of the stronger themes that emerged: Romanticism and Alienation.

Travellers ~ *On the Road* [6]

Romanticism ~ 'Yellow dancing off the pages' [7]

For the student participants, our two years together may be seen as a journey of 'becoming' as they sought the words and spaces within which to construct their narratives of identity and meaning. A deep vein of Romanticism gradually emerged during the second year, becoming most obvious in the writing of Neal,



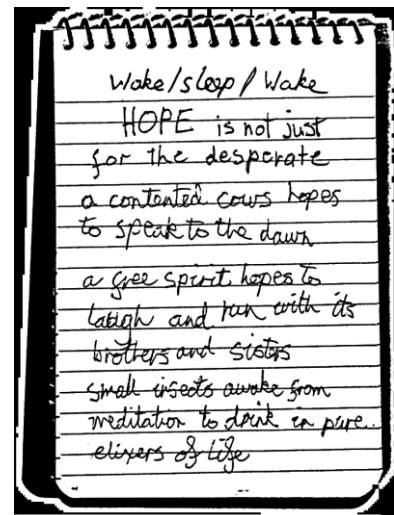
Extract #1 from Allen's notebook.

Allen and Jack. They and others within a core group of boys [8] began carrying small notebooks in which to record their spontaneous prose and poetry. They wrote and shared and experimented with words and concepts in ways not permitted within the English classes at school. At one stage they tried to start a student magazine but could not obtain the permission of the administration because of their 'reputation' and censorship issues:

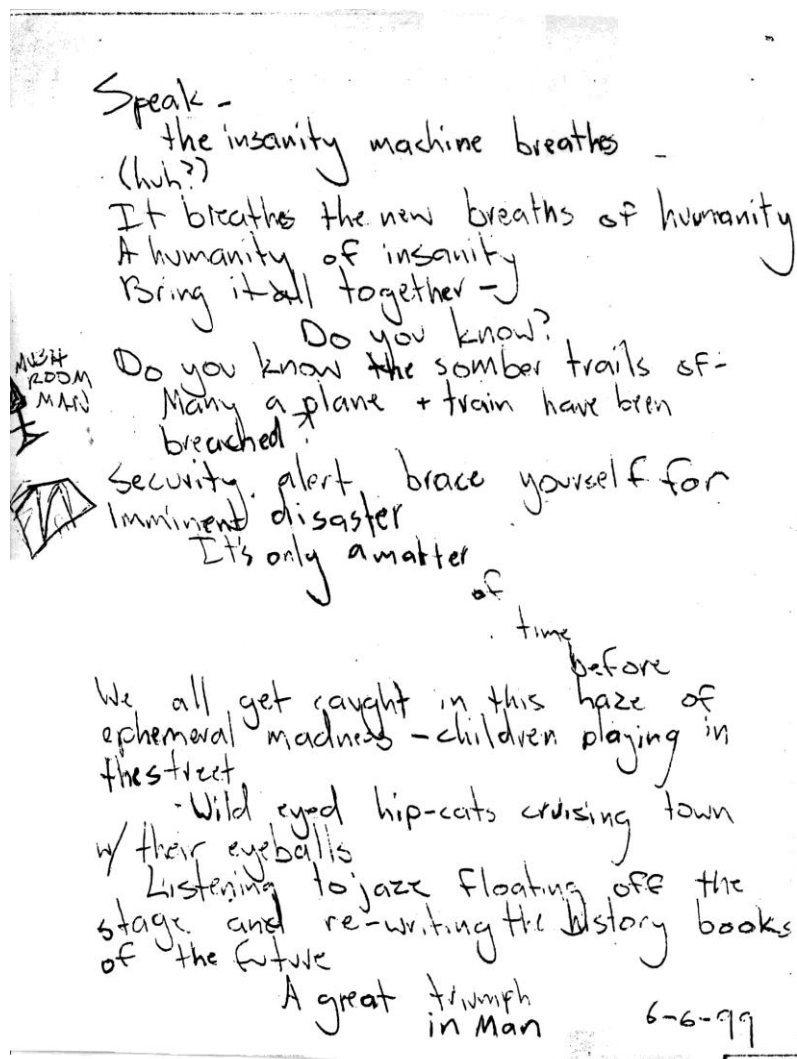
Jack: Um, yeah, Neal and I are starting up a literary magazine. We are going to try and make it as cheap as possible for people, and it's going to be, like, poetry and prose and all sorts of literary thingamajigs. By students for students. It will be an advocate of free speech *as so*

much as we are allowed - which really sucks. And the problem is, certain teachers, who will remain nameless at this school, don't give a fuck about the agreed-upon guidelines anyway, and just go off on their own fucking tangents, and like.....oh the radio is up to 85 decibels, well it's too loud, you know turn it downYou don't want to be really offensive....it's necessary sometimes to have a swear word ...

They wrote spontaneously and haphazardly without regard for convention. Reflecting the preoccupations of 19th Century Romantic and 20th Century Beat [9] writers, their thoughts and reactions were what mattered most.



Extract #2 from Allen's notebook.



Extract #1 from Jack's notebook

They became travellers on a road along which they sought creative and personal freedom even as they pondered the very futility of their quest as illustrated in Neal's poem, *Bohemian Dreams*:

Is this how you imagined it Neal Cassidy?
Dead in deepest cold.
What of you Bill Burroughs –
How was Tangiers?
And you Allen Ginsberg,
hippy culture queen –
Whatever happened to
your sweet bohemian dreams?
Perhaps this is
how it was meant to be.
Freedom is
after all
only an illusion.

These boys yearned to be artists, writers, musicians, actors and/or producers of films. They prized creative expression above material progress. They searched actively, looking beneath surface assumptions and drawing their own conclusions. The following discussion shows their interest in existentialism. It was lunchtime in D-2 and a CD of Ginsberg's poem, *Howl*, provided the background 'noise':

I saw the best minds
of my generation
destroyed by
madness, starving,
hysterical, naked ...

From *Howl*, Allen
Ginsberg

Jack: The existentialists were completely against suicide because it was like the ultimate tragedy- life – according to Camus – was whether to live or to die.....

Neal: Yeah – Camus – Camus thought of it as like-like a really bad thing –

Jack: That was pretty much the only important philosophical decision in your life ...

Glenda: Some people find the whole existentialism thing really depressing –

Jack: But-but existentialism isn't about ...depression ...it isn't about like giving up...

Neal: Nietzsche is about depression...

Jack: Yeah – but we're not talking about Nietzsche...

Glenda: Well some people get depressed about a lack of god and meaning.....

Neal: Yep.....

Jack: Well see the thing is the way I look at it ...it-it's up to – it's up to yourself...to just...you know live life.....like there's no like, purpose for us to be here – there's no you know – yeah – we weren't put on here for a purpose – we were just put on here..... You are the sum total of everything you've experienced in life...

Dean: You can sit there and think and wonder why we're here for the rest of your life while around you everything is going on or you can just go out and say well this is the way it is and I might find out or I might not but I might as well just livea philosopher will ask why are we here – why are we on the earth and stuff like that – but the fact is that *we're here* and whether there's a great reason there – we're still here so why not just like, live your life and if you find out then that's great...Don't waste your life thinking?! (*laughter*).....

Neal: Thinking isn't a waste of life.. thinking is as meaningful as anything else...what's meaningful about sitting there your whole life and making money – look at people's lives –

what pleasure do they get out of it? They work all day so that they can have like one hour to learn something

Jack: If thinking's fun then do it but if it's not then don't! (*ironically*. - Hedonism's the way to go – (*laughter*).....

Allen: Instead of searching for truth I'm just like searching for beauty....

Jack: Fun!

Neal: Basically everyone's a nihilistic hedonist.....Truth is obtained through suffering not through hedonism.....

Glenda: Why does it have to be obtained through suffering?

Jack: Yeah – why do you have to go through a whole heap of *shit* to see the light?

Neal: Because you do...

Jack: I don't want to *see* suffering... I don't want to *be* the suffering person – I want to be *happy*!

Neal: You have to be prepared to rip yourself apart to find truth.....

Glenda: Really? That's provocative Neal....

Dean: The fact is that you don't *need* truth – you only need it if you *want* it....cause you only need what you want.....truth is whatever you find it to be and there is no real definition of it...

Jack: **There's no truth only interpretations!**

The last comment I have placed in bold type because, to me, it seems to be a base-line difference between these students and their earlier counter-cultural heroes who show a contrasting commitment to *the* truth of their causes as epitomised in the following claim by Abbie Hoffman:

We were young, we were reckless, arrogant, silly, headstrong – *and we were right!*
(Stephens, 1998, p. vii – *emphasis added*)

In the above discussion and many more like them, Jack was an enthusiastic contributor. I have enduring images of Jack and sunshine on grassy spaces at the school – arms gesticulating as he held court amid a group of friends. Or – Jack *becoming* King Lear in the classroom – Jack – laughing playfully, ironically, scornfully at those 'lesser mortals' (usually teachers) who attempted to contain him. Constructed as something of a 'trouble-maker' at school, Jack was characteristically courageously challenging in his reflections:

Death creeps slowly in the night clutching a dagger that holds the key to life. Maybe death is a god. Plutonium is a god, therefore Australia is the mother of a god. If you have plutonium on your side, then no-one shall stand against you. We are all humans trapped in a shell of plutonium and petroleum, electricity and tax returns, fried eggs and cold coffee. **Fuck that! I'm not in for your gods! I'm not associating myself with your trivialities, your lime green cargo peddle pushers! I'm making myself a god!**

The extract on the following page is presented straight from Jack's notebook in his own script. Suggestive of travelling in the mind as well as on trains, I find the

style and subject matter reminiscent of Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Sensations flow into one another in a stream of images that merge according to the logic of pure emotional experience. Like his literary heroes, in his writing Jack attempted to capture the intensity of the moment couched within a bed of personal philosophical reflections:

Extract #2 from Jack's notebook

Where are your thoughts tonight >
Flying high over the ~~street~~ hearse waters of
the Pacific, sipping tea and talking Marx while
waitresses ~~hurry~~ hurry with Royal Emergency
haste, - "Her Majesty is gestating."

Ten floor Fusca^{ny} driven concrete star struck
monument, ascending into an oblivion of
penthouse and champagne, Discotek rampanctious
noise perpetuating from Hong Kong's electrical
cave 1 2 3 4 - people with their hats
on backwards talking indignantly with raves
of Kosovo, Serbs, maldi-greek, Peroxide hidden
racism veiled with Revlon and an Australian
Flag.

Olympiad, shooting under Roma St, floating
up the alcohol engorged TransContinental with
dreams to shape universes.

Elongated prisons of dreams spent playing mind
pinball in the infirmary, the jail, the street -
near to shop, the station, train it to
city in search of cunt or coke, draining
all pores of essential oils in the hope of
getting blow, sexual or other.

Chinatown, Chinatown, pavements rushing @ with
stake fortune cookie wrappers in the hope of
something electrifying betwixness, utopia in a
jar - hey man, hey sir to Toowong. Got a
smoke U brother?

The next section presents a more detailed selection of Neal's writing. My purpose in doing this is to illustrate the power of creative texts in ethnographic pursuits. Neal's emails (reproduced in the colours they in which they were written) and prose powerfully invite the reader into his emotional perspectives on life.

Alienation ~ Seasons in hell [10]

The main character in much of Neal's writing was the alienated Romantic individual. The following extracts from one of his short stories illustrate his frequently stated 'nausea' with 'society' and an existential hopelessness:



III

He missed the first bus. Sitting down on the concrete wall he read. Buses pulled up – releasing their body heat onto him. He looked around – next to him a pile of rocks covered in vines – lines of ants swept through the gaps – nestled among the fresh green vines was a cigarette butt. It started to rain again – he got up and sat down inside the bus shelter. The bus shelter was filled with trapped body heat – warm but stuffy. He began to read again. A bus pulled up in front of the shelter – shutting him off from the real world – it occurred to him that he was sitting in a bomb shelter – spastic combination of metal and steel. People and faces started to gather round – he looked up – blank faces smiling blank smiles, laughing blank laughs looked back at him. He began to feel sick.

(Neal – author's comment: *People give me nausea all the time because they are always fucking me over and I hate it and I hate them. One day I will wake up and hate myself and then it will only be a matter of time.*)

V

He stood in front of the hill. The dead tree naked against the dark background. Light seeped out the edges of the cloud mass – remembrances of the dying sun. A cold wind blew – sweeping through his jumper – there were no leaves on the hill for it to rustle. He climbed it – the yellow grass breaking beneath his feet. At the top he turned and surveyed the void – behind the green hills the sun saluted the world – the first stars had appeared in the now deep blue sky. He climbed the tree – dead grey wood. At the top he attached the rope to the tree and once more looked at the sky. The sun had performed its final act – fire burned through the atmosphere – red clouds against the orange background – purple crept across it – patches growing together – a thousand stars revealed themselves in the heavens. He smiled and fell out of the tree – his neck snapping as the rope ran out.

(Neal – author's comment: *Hope is dead. Man is dead. Nietzsche says God is dead - out of pity for man....the corruption of society reaches us all in the end....this is the end....*)

As our relationship evolved, Neal began to communicate a profound sense of alienation from his peers and from society in general. He had never confessed such feelings to me before but after breaking down during an exam we began to e-mail each other. For Neal, the conversations enabled him to share his reflections about his ongoing personal difficulties with school, his interest in literature and his growing cynicism about life:

Email extract #1:

Subject: Re: uh-huh
(I am not suicidal but very depressed)
(NEAL) TODAY I FEEL LIKE SHIT.

People do not like me. I am surrounded by people who make faces, exchange wry grins + other fucking brilliant witty devices with each other while talking to me> I have to have some people over for my birthday. 2 people are coming – perhaps out of obligation. This convinces me that I am disliked. People don't give a FUCK aBout me – I do give a fuck about them although I may not show it. Given the chance to go to someones house I would gladly accept it. Not make up fucking bullshit excuses about dogs being sick and studying and all the other fucking bullshit that fucked up people think.

Why the fuck should I like people when they don't like me. The fuckers have already robbed me of my childhood are they going to rob me of my whole fucking life? I can only take being fucked over by people for so long.

PEOPLE GIVE ME NAUSEA ALL THE TIME BECAUSE THEY ARE ALWAYS FUCKING ME OVER AND I HATE IT AND I HATE THEM. ONE DAY I WILL WAKE UP AND HATE MYSELF AND THEN IT WILL ONLY BE A MATTER OF TIME.I HAVE SO MANY REASONS TO HATE PEOPLE WHY DON'T THEY GIVE ME SOME REASONS TO LIKE THEM.THE FUCKERS. (

(GLENDA) Why do you assess yourself so much? I think we would all be depressed if we did that – unless we choose to acknowledge the +++++s as well as the -----s.

Hmmmmmmmm If you will forgive my presumptuousness, you sometimes give the impression that you prefer your own company to that of others. So.....people back off....you need to practise reaching out to people even if it means taking risks of rejection...if we don't risk we don't get the opportunity to gain that which we deeply desire. And yes – sometimes we WILL be rejected – but it won't kill us)

(NEAL) Always the group I am drawn to rejects me and this causes me to resent them. It allows me to see through their superficialities but I would gladly trade places with them.

Email extract #2:

Subject: RE: Draft
Maybe the point of life is to drink Coke + Eat Big Macs + Die. Tolstoy thought the meaning of life was love –Maybe. Or maybe the meaning of life is to form part of the parasitical human race and consume. Rough draft is coming..

Based upon co-construction of data, e-mails proved to be an interesting development in my research. It was not planned as such but was a consequence of my growing

relationship with the students. It was within the spaces of this correspondence that Neal revealed the breadth and depth of his literary knowledge and his attempts to emulate his literary heroes:

Email extract #3:

Subject: RE: Stuff
(Neal) IT WAS GREY
(GLENDA): Grey? I actually love the rain...reminds me of Europe
(NEAL): I DON'T REALLY SEE THE POINT OF EUROPE (excluding Paris). I PREFER THE THIRD WORLD. MORE PEOPLE MEANS MORE INTERESTING people....For Example:
In Vietnam I saw:
The England of Dickens (artful dodgers, dark brick kilns)
The America of Kerouac (hobos + lonesome travellers)
The America of Steinbeck (okies + country folk)
The America of Upton Sinclair (people sleeping on streets in newspapers + begging for money)
The Darkness of Conrad on the Laos/Vietnam border)
The Middle Ages of Hesse (idyllic countryside, village girls)
The High Mountains of Buddhism (tall mountains descending to green valleys)
I saw the bullshit of capitalism (coke + chewing gum everywhere)
I saw water buffalo wallowing in rice paddies in the land in the middle of the airport
I saw three year olds get down on their knees and beg for money
I saw children smiling because people had been kind to them
In Europe you seeAMERICA

Email extract #4:

Subject: RE: Writing
(Neal) No I don't like writing unless it is perfect (or very close to) when reading I am always conscious of the faults of the piece
(Glenda) yes – but so little would ever be written if we waited for perfection.....
(Neal) Yes – but we wouldn't waste our time reading shit. It's different to being afraid. I'm not sure myself if what I write has any value. Most literary figures I like composed spontaneously. Ginsberg's Howl was like that. Yer that is right – and Kerouac's work and others – Burroughs I think. I practice style + writing but I would never go over something I have written very often. Style + content should be worked out before writing begins or dealt with while writing so as to ensure that it doesn't need revision. Otherwise it is artificial and essay like.
(Glenda) No.....not necessarily.....art takes time.....thought.....crafting....
(Neal) No – that isn't art or if it is it is appoline. Read Nietzsche or Schiller. You don't craft lines they come to you. Good prose + poetry is dictated directly from the subconscious. Look at Kerouac who wrote The Subterraneans in three days after a failed love affair. He translated his emotions into a beautiful novel. Same with Blake who wrote Introduction to Milton (the Jerusalem one) in response to his trial. The important thing to ensure is that the skills are there to begin with. I would never publish anything unless I thought what I did was worthy of the trees chopped down to publish it.....

Similar to Jack's literary inspirations, Neal's preoccupation with spontaneous prose reflects the attitudes of Beat writers. Kerouac recommended that the writer should not

worry about precise terminology and revisions but to “write outwards swimming in a sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion” (cited in Hipkiss, 1976, p. 82). However, Neal was his own harshest critic and despite reassuring him about his writing ability, he sometimes became so frustrated in his attempts to achieve his perceived level of ‘perfection’ that he would rip up his notebooks. This continued even though other aspects of his life were progressing:

Email extract #5:

Subject: Blah

(Neal) I kind of felt really drained today so hmmmmmmmm I ripped up all my notebooks (again...gotta control that selfdestructive urge....) + deleted my chapters + ripped up all the drafts. This isn't really as bad as it seems though because it allows me to start afresh if I want to (not sure I do now but maybe in a week, month, year (who knows)). I suppose it's kind of a learning experience, and you know I'm young – there's no need to get tied into something just yet – I've got a lot of practice – besides getting rid of all your writing helps you to develop your own style – you don't get stuck in other peoples genres. Hmmm yeah so I'll just have to wait and see – I feel much better having said that

The introspection of earlier times continued but, as evidenced in this e-mail, it was less harsh and more self-aware. The chapters he had destroyed belonged to a novel he had started to write and given to me to peruse. The following excerpt illustrates Neal's creative abilities. Romantic imagery continues but without the darkness evident in earlier texts:

X.

In the autumn the snowline crept down from the mountains, spilling over the edge of the valley. The villagers, cloaked in thick goat skins, spent the time clustered round open fires in the larger huts. But even when the bitter winds blew their hardest, the goat herders still made their way along the paths winding up the valley in search of the little remaining foliage.

Like other herders, Phoebus travelled further and further in search of fodder for the animals – trudging through ice, the chill biting into his face. Crossing the mountains – bathed in luminescent snow – in search of the small, sheltered hollows where grass still grew, Phoebus stood alone – a tiny figure on an infinite blanket of white. Like the sun, his soul was lost in an endless white mist.

The animals of ice and snow, the fox, the hare, criss-crossed the land with their tracks. Superimposed on these, the tightly packed prints of the goats and their herders looked alien, the eerily methodical tracks of intruders. Winter crept across the valley – a hostile god – too long forgotten by the villagers.

Grey winds swept through the village, carrying with them blasts of icy rain. The huts shook violently beneath the force of immortal fury. The sky roared – green and red overlaid with an omnipresent grey. But beneath their roofs the people still took comfort, for in their frost ravaged homes, Phoebus burnt and shone like the sun.

By this time, the sun was also starting to shine on Neal's life. He and others had gained entry to university and were looking forward to greater intellectual and personal freedom. The colourful texts of previous emails ceased:

Email extract #6:

Subject: reflections on neoisms

Hmmmmmm ...Silence...The now: ...Hmmmmmm...Neo-post-structuralist, quasi-post-modern, post-colonial, neo-imperialist, post-yesterday, pre-tomorrow, new-Tuesday last week, neo-the day I stubbed my toe two months ago? (Sums it up for me).... Actually, I think it is pretty risky to try and label a time-period because it has the tendency to ascribe a uniformity that doesn't necessarily exist to a group of people. Allen, Jack and I had coffee at the university a few days ago and tried to call you but you were engaged all the time or something. Email back soon Yeah...send some writing as well. Cya Neal.

As I developed Neal's story for my larger research project, I reflected upon his sensitivity and intelligence, his frustration and his black holes of despair. I traced his journey towards the beginnings of greater confidence and I realised that for him, school had been a place to be endured, a place that actually constrained his intellect rather than nurtured it. Neal was periodically constructed as a 'difficult' student who talked in class and made fun of the teachers. Despite its reputation as a relatively liberal institution, when confronted by students of Neal's calibre, Hoffman State High failed to accommodate his abilities and attitudes. It, like many high schools, was too locked into normative structures and disciplinary procedures that were more concerned with order and power than with the potential of an individual such as Neal.

Concluding observations

Researching youth: doing educational ethnography

My thoughts...my *thoughts* are everything to me....
They think they *own* our thoughts....(Paul)

In respect to the majority of young people in this study, there is a theme that runs through much of the data. It lies beneath the metaphors of their poetry and surfaces within the gaps and silences of their conversations. It cuts across gender, race and the

surface reality of their presentation to the world and, in their utterances, they have espoused it in very different ways. Underpinning much of what they have said to me and to each other is a belief in, and desire for, individual freedom – to think, to express, to be and become that which they feel is right for them, in that place and at that time of their lives. The following comment by Allen sums up these impulses:

The thing that is non-negotiable, is freedom - that's the thing about all those teachers when they try and bring their power trip down on me ...I just laugh at them because they have nothing on me....they are just the same as me. nobody is above or below...

This research could not be used to generalize about the young people at this school nor make predictions about youth at other sites. This is the first principle that is necessary for all ethnographic work regardless of the group upon which the research is focused. As Harvey (1989) observes:

The idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism (p. 48).

Such views have been embraced by post-feminist and post-colonial writers and need to be foregrounded in discussions about youth who are routinely categorized within popular (as well as in academic) writing as *Generation Y*, *Millennials* or *Generation Next*. The texts I gathered in the course of this research are rich in the particularities of *subjective* meanings that call upon us “to reject inhibitions imposed by assumed meanings and to cultivate in their place the fiercely passionate and undomesticated side of our scholarly nature that challenges preconceived ideas” (Thomas, 1993. p. 7).

However, whilst endeavouring to allow the students' voices to speak through these and other papers, I am aware that researcher subjectivities and editorial decisions have shaped the 'realities' I represent. Therefore, readers should approach this and other ethnographic research with a *deconstructive* attitude rather than with expectations of researched 'truths'. We need to remember that *all* readings are contestable (Clifford, 1986). I would like my research to invite *contemplation upon*

assumptions: assumptions about young people and the way we educate them and define their identities; assumptions about power, intelligence, success, truth and reality; and, additionally, assumptions about our own motivations as researchers, teachers and administrators within educational institutions. Unfortunately, some people may find the questioning of such assumptions problematic and thus I conclude with cautionary advice to other teacher-researchers.

In retrospect I believe I was probably naïve to have embarked on an extensive ethnographic study in the context of a Queensland high school at which I was a teacher. The degree of closeness required to ‘do’ good ethnographic studies was, inevitably, to clash with my perceived role as a teacher. According to Miller and Glassner (1997):

Social distances that include differences in relative power can result in suspicion and lack of trust, both of which the researcher must actively seek to overcome. Rapport building is the key to this process. Establishing trust and familiarity, showing genuine interest, assuring confidentiality and not being judgemental are some important elements of building rapport (p. 106).

‘Rapport’, ‘trust’, ‘familiarity’ – all are vitally necessary to the gathering of ethnographic data, but my experience taught me that such teacher/student interactions are circumscribed and narrowly defined within the cultures of most mainstream school cultures. I believe that until there is greater understanding of educational ethnographic methodology within schools, researchers undertake this very important work at considerable personal and professional risk.

Endnotes

- [1] Title of the classic children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), by Maurice Sendak. I chose this title in order to reflect the unpredictable nature of this ethnography and the whimsical sense of fun it engendered within the places and spaces of data gathering. Within the larger project, I embedded literary references and student generated photographs and artwork as contemplative echoes some of the preoccupations and interests of my students. I have included these as appropriate within this paper.
- [2] Observation from one of my student participants, 'Paul'. All names of people and places have been changed to pseudonyms. Student texts have been reproduced without correction of grammar and spelling.
- [3] 1999
- [4] Twenty-one girls and eleven boys participated in this research.
- [5] From a poem by W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*
- [6] Reference to Jack Kerouac's classic novel of freedom and longing that defined what it meant to be "Beat". It was very popular with the group and featured in many of their discussions. Student participants frequently tried to copy his style.
- [7] A line from one of Jack's poems
- [8] Ten of the twenty-one boys.
- [9] The origins of 'Beat' philosophy lie in the street cafes of post-war Paris with the avant-garde of Left Bank intelligentsia. Such influences spread abroad, finding their most fertile ground in North America among the radical intellectuals of the 1950s, (subsequently labelled 'beatniks'), who appropriated elements of European existentialist philosophies to challenge the social mores of western society. Apparently favoured by the disillusioned children of the bourgeois west, these ideas found new expression in the writing of Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Neal Cassidy.
- [10] Reference to Rimbaud's poem, *A Season in Hell*. Rimbaud's writing situates his works within the literature of 'rebellious youth'. He abandoned poetry at the age of 20.

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