Fancy a dress-up? A portrait of the complexities of adult fancy dress costuming as a lived experience and material practice.

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Declaration

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

Signed: ......................... Date: ..........................
Abstract

This thesis builds a picture of the inner workings of fancy dress as a form of adult socialization, individual expression and material practice. It uses ethnographic methodologies to study one particular group of regular fancy dress practitioners, a Sydney-based group of Baby Boomers friends of which I am a member. This group is worthy of study because they have participated in fancy dress parties for over thirty years and these events have been integral to building, shaping and sustaining their community.

The thesis proceeds from the finding that the purpose of wearing fancy dress at parties is to draw people together in playful and shared celebration. It investigates the complexities of adult fancy dress manifests as a conduit for community entertainment and social cohesion. It also explores what being in a fancy dress costume brings to an event as well as exploring what is involved in its preparation and execution.

Fancy dress is also a dress code that is part of the continuum of clothing and fashion etiquette that has boundaries of expectation and acceptance. Fancy dress practice is complex because it encompasses the meaning and production of fashion and dress, the hierarchies of appearance and gender, the performance of self and challenges our notions of the appropriately dressed body. The conclusion examines the role of dress-up as a popular form of social celebration in the broader community and points the way for further study.
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Chapter 1

Fashioning Fancy Dress

Introduction

When asked, “Fancy a dress-up?” what comes to mind? Do you imagine going to a party in a silly costume with a group of friends? Do you harbour thoughts of naughty or glamorous costumes, toga parties or gorilla suits or fantasise about being someone you are not in everyday life? Perhaps at the next party you can get away with that short skirt or the platinum blond wig you always wanted to wear. Alternatively, you are cursing, but have a social obligation to go to the party and imagine yourself hovering around in some forsaken venue looking ridiculous in a costume and feeling uncomfortable. So, do you fancy a dress-up or not?

Dressing up in fancy dress is an embodied activity that directly influences the ambience of a social occasion, be it a themed party, hen night or community fun run. It is the fact that people are in ‘out of the ordinary’ costumes and look quirky, funny, sexy or uber ugly that can induce a spectrum of feelings from unity and merriment to isolation and embarrassment. Is fancy dress just window dressing and whimsy or is a fancy dress costume a kind of “magical instrument” (Stone 1965, 237)? This study puts the fancy dress costume, its production and meaning, social significance and impact at the core of its inquiry.

From anecdotal evidence, observation in the general population, articles in the popular media, the existence of a large number of online fancy dress retailers as well
as my own personal experiences of fancy dress parties, it would appear that fancy
dress has many manifestations and is typically a popular form of social celebration. It
is for this reason that I believe that my approach and the topic are worthy of scholarly
investigation. Scholars from disciplines such as dress studies and sociology are slowly
addressing the gap in research into the diversity of fancy dress participation. For
example, Anne Peirson-Smith (2013) has investigated the motivations behind
Cosplay, a current trend among young adults in Southeast Asia, which is the practice
of dressing-up in Anime and Manga themed costumes and assuming the personae of
the characters. Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Janine Fron et al. (2007), from the field of
creative technologies, surveyed the literature on virtual games such as Second Life
and physical dress-up and argued for greater gender balance in dress-up play in game
design. Sociologists Kimberly Miller et al. (1991) designed a five-year study to
examine American college students’ perceptions of personal identity and role-play
when wearing Halloween costumes and found that women were less likely to hide
their identity than men. Annebella Pollen (2011) from the field of Art History and
Design conducted research in Britain about how mass produced dress-up costumes for
young girls legitimizes stereotypical gender roles and creates restrictions for
imaginative play. This thesis is a contribution to the emerging multi- and inter-
disciplinary inquiry into fancy dress.

My project is based on a close study of the workings, experiences and practices of one
particular, longstanding group of Sydney friends, known as Rent-a-Crowd who are
enthusiastic fancy dressers and have been for many years. In the spirit of the ‘topsy-
turvy’ nature of fancy dress as well as to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I
allocated them pseudonyms based on a range of generic and/or popular, fancy dress
characters such as Punk or Viking and they will be referred to by these names in all subsequent material. For example I allocated the pseudonym of Gypsy\(^1\), to a participant and member of Rent-a-Crowd who below describes how she feels about her friends and being involved in fancy dress:

Well I’m so glad fancy dress is part of my life. I’ve met a group of friends who enjoy doing it. I think fancy dress really adds something to life. I think it’s so important to enjoy life; it can be so serious at times. We get caught up in this whole world of treadmills and so it’s really great fun to have a group of friends who enjoy doing something like fancy dress. It’s a bit of escapism to get out there and experiment in diverse ways.

This cohort of adult friends, of whom I am part, has over twenty-five years of dynamic fancy dress participation.

This thesis investigates their relationship between fancy dress costuming, community and fun. While this group may be seen as unusual in its long term and regular fancy dress participation they are a useful lens through which to understand some of the elements of fancy dress more broadly. Rent-a-Crowd have a variety of approaches to creating their outfits and differing levels of enjoyment at the parties, which indicates that fancy dress is not a one-size-fits all participatory experience. However there are similarities in purpose and practice that underpin all fancy dress events, such as a wish to show individual flair, the enjoyment of participating in frivolous festivity and a sense of kinship and community that is brought about by the participants being in fancy costumes.

\(^1\) Gypsy is the pseudonym that I ascribed to this participant and she will be referred to by this name throughout the thesis. The other participants are also ascribed pseudonyms throughout this thesis, I would like to thank everyone in Rent-a-Crowd for taking the time to share their wonderful anecdotes and insights with me. You are all stars.
Aims of thesis

The aim of this thesis is to build a picture of some contemporary adult fancy dress practices through an ethnographic study of a group of friends who have a long history of fancy dress participation. The rationale for this thesis challenges a common scholarly theory, that fancy dress costuming, in all its forms, works as a conduit for the subject to become temporarily ‘other’ by putting on a costume that enables the ‘secret’ or ‘fantasy’ self to be set free. While there are elements of this at play in all forms of ‘extra-ordinary’ or hyperreal costuming, I found through the close study of my participants, general observation and my own participation, fancy dress is a play activity that involves novelty, anticipatory excitement and a way to embody imagination. It is about being amused by the costumes of others while celebrating as part a community of like-minded and like attired peers.

Seminal cultural theorist of play Johan Huizinga argues that there are two things at the core of play activities, 1) exceptional moments and 2) durable effects. He states being involved in a play or game activity can produce:

The feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. (Huizinga [1938] 1955, 12)

The rationale behind the structure of the next two chapters emanated from my data and builds on Huizinga’s concepts of play. Chapter Two explores some of the exceptional moments that are part of the palette of fancy dress and later Chapter
Three is an example of the durable effects of fancy dress play as a lived experience for the study group.

Two core findings emerged from my study. The first was the concept of playful fun, which forms part of the exceptional moments at a fancy dress party. When talking about fun, there has to be an understanding of the term in order to help navigate through intricacies of the debate. For the purposes of this thesis fun is a combination of feelings of amusement, an activity that provides amusement and playful mockery, trickery or joking. Fun was a recurring concept of the fancy dress experience that emerged from my data and involved more than just wearing costumes. For Rent-a-Crowd their priority at a fancy dress party is to have a fun time celebrating with friends and not the pursuit of any significant sense of transformation although ‘playing-up’ is part of the fun. For the interviewees there was fun to be had in various ways, such as sourcing costumes when preparing for the party. Afterwards, there is fun to be had looking at photographs of the costumes and using them as a prompt to remember the party antics.

The second finding pointed to the importance of fancy dress as a community practice that has helped build and sustain relationships through the embodiment of celebration and amusement. This is an example of what Huizinga calls the durable effects of play. Fancy dress has been used to great effect for Rent-a-Crowd and their history of practice and set of shared memories has had the enduring effect of helping to keep them together. Although a fancy dress party is based on the transience of the costuming and of the party and is superficial in intent, for my study group there have been the benefits of bringing some relationships into being and solidifying existing
ones. The saying, ‘friends who play together stay together’ rings true for Rent-a-Crowd.

While earlier theories have focused on the performance and play aspects across the spectrum of costuming my study delves into the real-world and pragmatic experiences of fancy dress. I posit that fancy dress is a form of adult play that can be filled with exceptional moments of fun and amusement and this helps put people in a party mood and makes an event feel extra special. My data indicates that Rent-a-Crowd use dressing-up for entertainment at social celebrations to promote feelings of cohesion, which are the durable effects of this group’s long-term involvement and participation with fancy dress.

The potential significance of this thesis is to illuminate the inner workings of fancy dress and fancy dress parties as part of the contemporary scholarly interest in material culture, temporality, the senses and sensuous ethnography. The project explores the role of fancy dress as a conduit for socialization, celebration and amusement. It draws on oral accounts and participant observation to paint a portrait that challenges some of the traditional views on fancy dress costuming that centre on the assumption of a core self that is temporarily transformed and/or reveals a secret persona that can only manifest through costuming (Stone 1965, Eicher 1981, Miller 1991). My research found that for Rent-a-Crowd, fancy dress is primarily about enjoying the company of friends and being part of a community, and seeing each other in a variety of costumes makes it more fun and memorable.
My study also examines fancy dress as a hyperreal form of clothing. It is a way of
dressing that blurs the real with the imagined to create a temporary simulation that
stands in for the real for the duration of the costume party. I analyse the elements that
make a fancy dress costume, such as materials, styling and theme, as well as showing
how people feel when wearing fancy dress. The project briefly considers the relation
between the study group’s fancy dress practices and those in a broader Australian
context and suggests further avenues of enquiry.

**What constitutes fancy dress?**

In the general course of events going out recreationally with friends or peers is
marked as a time separate from work/daily activities and often warrants a change of
clothes. Fancy dress is an exaggerated and often a humour based change of clothes
with “complex roles and actants” (Barcan 2004, 22) that carries with it “orientational
expectations” (Goffman 1965, 50) that are appropriate in the context of a fancy dress
event. At other social events one is usually expected to wear the ‘right thing’ for a
given occasion, be it a backyard BBQ, a night at the opera or going to the pub, dinner
at a restaurant or a party. Special party clothes are worn because we expect them to
help us feel good about ourselves and help us to enjoy the party. According to
sociologist John Harvey:

> Nice looking clothes are an offer of friendship … [We] like our clothes to
> match our mood, even intensify the mood of the moment. So party clothes can
> be freedom, expectation in the shape of loose unbuttoned sleeves…[the]
> exhilaration in the lift of chiffon panels can be a flickering impatience to
dance. (2008, 37)

Party clothes can make us feel relaxed, debonair or flirtatious and give a lift to the
occasion, be it a cocktail party, wedding or fancy dress. Events will each have their
own dress code, but what makes fancy dress different is that it is supposed to be
dressing just for fun. The fancy dress party themes are to encourage people to think
outside the box of the everyday and being ‘in it’ together ideally promotes a sense of
celebratory unity.

Fancy dress as a communal activity can be viewed through the lens of material culture
as it explores the symbiosis between the costumes, the people and their cultural mores
and aids in painting a portrait of fancy dress practice. This project taps into the
material culture of Rent-a Crowd by examining their fancy dress anecdotes, costumes
and photographs. Material culture is an interdisciplinary field that according to
historian Jules Prown (2008, 1) is a:

Study through the artifacts of the beliefs, the values, ideas, attitudes and
assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.

Materiality is also about the sensory experience of being in fancy dress, such as the
vision, the tactile feel on the body, how movement in the costume is affected, the
sound of the costume and types of fabrics or material used or even the musty smell of
a second hand or hired item. The fancy dress costume can change one’s way of being
such as making one move differently because of the layers of net petticoats when one
is dressed as a ‘Rock’n’Roller’ or feeling flirtatious dressed as a Ziegfeld Follies
showgirl. These sensory experiences are part of the physicality of fancy dress and
should be taken into account in any investigation.

Costume, according to Eicher and Roach-Higgins, is “Clothing for an ‘out-of-
everyday’ social role or activity, that may include dress for the theater, folk, or other
festivals, ceremonies, and rituals” (1992, 3). For the purpose of this thesis fancy dress is defined as a form of fantasy or ‘extra’ ordinary costume that is worn by adults to themed parties. This project does not delve into the world of fantasy costuming worn as part of fetishism role-play, re-enactment costuming or Halloween. Within the study group the common practice is that fancy dress costume is worn only for the duration of the party.

The paradox of fancy dress is that although it is supposed to be a participatory entertainment, the guests are expected to flex their sartorial creativity within the guidelines of the party theme. There is an element of coercion to conform to the underlying non-conformity of fancy dress; it is not a free for all. Within themes of fancy dress costumes there are many traditions to follow; one can depict a character from history, a celebrity, a book or film, an idea, an animal, a concept or time period. Several elements influence how people concoct their fancy dress outfits, and this can include the participant’s level of interest, if they feel inspired, the time available, and how much, if anything, they want or have to spend. Costumes can range from being homemade, hired, borrowed, bought new from a shop or increasingly, via on-line sites as well as elements being found in charity shops; but most often the participants in my study group will use a mixture of sources.

The term fancy dress can be applied not only to the costume, but also to the practice and event where the costume is worn. ‘Fancy dress’ or ‘fancy dress costume’ is the English/Australian term for such fantasy or extra-ordinary costumes. A ‘fancy dress party’ is the term for a particular type of social event where these costumes are worn.
In the United States of America and Canada the term is ‘costume’ or ‘costuming’ for the outfits, and ‘costume party’ for the event. The terms ‘fancy dress’ and ‘costume’ are interchangeable, but as this thesis draws on Australian data and experiences, I will use the Australian terms as above. Also I have additionally defined ‘themed events’ as social occasions where the adult participants wear costumes but which fall outside the scope of the fancy dress party. Such events may include corporate functions, sporting competitions, hen and stag nights, fundraisers and annual festivals such as Mardi Gras and Halloween.

Fancy dress is part of the continuum of dress. It cannot be divorced from other clothing styles we wear and is subject to the whims of fashion and cultural mores. Fancy dress usually shares the same physical components as other forms of dress, such as sleeves and skirts, trousers and jackets, and is completed with accessories. There are defining elements that signify the clothing article as a fancy dress costume which can include but are not dependent on the following: the type of fabric used, which can be shiny, gaudy, hairy, glittery, dirty or dull; the proportions of the garment, such as being oversized, too tight, too short, totally covering the body or being very revealing; the subject matter, such as a historical character or a concept; and the intention of the wearer, which forms the lynch pin of the whole concept. There is nothing inherent in an outfit that makes it fancy dress but it is in the combination of the design and the motivation of dressing for transgression, fun and amusement coupled with the wearer’s participation at the fancy dress party that makes it so.
The fancy dress costume can be as subtle as wearing a *lei* (a garland of flowers), a badge or just a colour; it does not have to be a full-blown wig, an outrageous costume and it may not always alter behaviour. By wearing fancy dress at a costume party, one is adhering to a specific dress code by interpreting the theme of the party and showing respect to the hosts by being part of their festive vision. There is unity and equity between the revelers by virtue of everyone, in varying degrees being ‘in place by being out of place’. Fancy dress brings people together in the silliness of dress-up play and is a marker of being outside the ordinary.

Fancy dress has its roots in carnival and still has elements of topsy-turvy, parody, exuberance and excess, which manifests in the costumes and to varying degrees in the outlandish behaviours of the participants (Craik 2005, 209). The following anecdote by two Rent-a-Crowd interviewees Viking and Elf captures the essence of fancy dress:

Viking: Fancy dress kick-starts you out of your humdrum life; it says forget about work, we’re in fun mode. Isn’t this great? Let’s go straight into happy mode and talk about fun things.

Elf: It’s like a big switch. You put the costume on, and bang - you’re in there.

For them, putting on the costume signals closing the door on the humdrum outside world; it is now time to play. You put a fancy dress costume on and you believe it has the power to make you happy so you feel happy. That is the perceived wisdom embedded in their account of fancy dress. For Viking, fancy dress is a form of escapism that is as much a mental escape as a physical one. It gives him permission to indulge in frivolous chitchat and not discuss work etc. and is about entering into a
happy place even though it may appear to others to be a form of delusion and forced jollity.

Dress codes carry expectations of place, behaviour and occasion such as for work, school or a wedding, but the big switch of fancy dress - its raison d’être - is to dress with frivolity and fun in mind. Fancy dress is an external and bodily expression of being temporarily and teasingly out of the ordinary. Wearing fancy dress heralds that one is looking ‘out of place’ and not being everyday. The fancy dress costume gives one a sense of being ‘in place’ by being at the event and part of the party community precisely because of the costume. While one is united with the other revelers who are in costume one’s separation from the everyday is signaled by one’s quirky appearance. It is assumed that there is pleasure and fun to be had by being viewed and feeling separate from the everyday. Fancy dress is a social practice that is enjoyed and experienced within a group, where there has to be an agreed sense of ordinary and everyday appearance so that the ‘otherness’ of the fancy dress costuming is seen as ‘extra-ordinary’ and quirky. The essence of the playful ‘fantabulousness’ of fancy dress is that it is imagined in our heads, realised on our bodies and performed with our peers.

Adult dress-up is a potentially egalitarian activity where everyone is simultaneously actor, critic and audience. At a fancy dress party there is no distinction between the guests who are both spectator and actor, because everyone is participating on an allegedly equal footing joined together in laughter and fun. It is frequently claimed that this has the effect of temporarily suspending any hierarchies for the duration of the occasion. Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965) offered an
interpretation of the egalitarian ethos of medieval carnival that equally applies to contemporary fancy dress practices. He states:

Carnival does not know footlights…it does not acknowledge the distinction between actors and spectators…carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all of the people. ([1965] 1984, 7)

As with carnival, fancy dress combines the real and ideal and pokes fun at the hierarchies and mores of everyday life. Bakhtin analysed manifestations of grotesque and carnival in order to understand Medieval and Renaissance folk culture as portrayed in the writings of the author Rabelais.

Fancy dress manifests as a humour driven form of modern folk culture where one is able to embody transgression from everyday life through costuming and create a temporary make-believe world. One can see parallels in Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival with modern fancy dress when he states that:

Carnival is people’s second life, organised on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life…[a] utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance. ([1965] 1984, 8-9)

This festive second life of carnival can be applied to fancy dress because it also has built-in temporal limits - its ‘pumpkin time’, when things go back to normal at a prescribed time (as in the tale of Cinderella). It is vital that the hegemony of everyday life is restored after the event because the special nature and associations of time, place and costume would be diminished and lose meaning. In traditional carnival the old order needs to be restored so that ‘the people’ feel they have riled against the everyday but are now content to settle into daily life until the next carnival or fancy
dress event. Today, suburban fancy dress parties still need to have the parameters of a set time and a specific place and benchmarks of what is acceptable in behaviour and dress, which is dependent on the values of the group or culture. Fancy dress in whatever guise or occasion is temporally and spatially specific and one has to adhere to the rules of contained ‘gay abandonment’. As we shall shortly see there are still some fancy dress occasions where hegemony is challenged.

Fancy dress also exposes identity as not being an inherent quality but having performative aspects that are transferable, transportable and transient. Many of us play roles every day but with fancy dress we know that it is a temporary fantasy and we will return to the mundane everyday once the party is over and the costume is off. Fancy dress embodies a form of hyper reality that both exposes and conceals because the costumes are worn next to and touch the skin. Fancy dress announces to the world ‘look at me - see I am different’. In this way fancy dress is also a feast for the senses as it is about having permission to overtly look at others while knowingly being looked at - the pleasures of scopophilia. There is also the tactile and sensuous experience of wearing costumes made from exotic or unusual fabrics, or the thrill of revealing/concealing more of the body than usual, of being in disguise, of wearing colours and textures not normally worn, of bending gender, of being an object or animal. All this is within the realms of possibility with fancy dress and is the main reasons it is a popular form of celebration and entertainment.
Pocket sized view of Fancy Dress history

Fancy dress has evolved over different eras and communities to become the variety of practices it is today. Although my study of contemporary fancy dress documents the practices of a small group of friends, fancy dress costuming has a long history as a popular social pastime and form of celebration that has evolved from diverse and international rituals and traditions. In Europe, the custom of using masks and disguises for celebrations can be traced back to medieval festivals of misrule such as pre-Lent Mardi Gras, Halloween, the masquerades of Venice and the Jewish festival of Purim. These festivities and celebrations, despite seeming to promote hedonistic abandonment and in some cases the ‘topsy-turvy’ role-play inversions of master/servant or male/female, were a tool to keep the hegemonic values of the day alive (Jarvis 1984, Cooper 2010).

By the eighteenth century, masquerade balls in Europe were public events and those held in the pleasure gardens of London had become regarded as dens of iniquity and arenas for licentious liaisons, (Stevenson and Bennett 1978, Jarvis 1984, Cooper 2010). From the mid-nineteenth century, fancy dress became sanitized due in part to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert’s penchant for historically themed events and parties (Jarvis 1984, 13). This royal seal of approval led to costumed parties becoming respectable among the burgeoning middle classes, who had the means and time to indulge their fantasies. During this era, themed parades, charity events, public and private fancy dress parties were popular forms of celebration and entertainment, such as Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee of 1897 and in Australia the Sydney Mayoral Ball of 1879 held in the Exhibition Building (Jarvis 1984, Buchart 2012).
As the nineteenth century was also an era of burgeoning ideas and technological development there were changes afoot in the way fancy dress costumes and costumed events were enacted. For example, according to Colleen McQuillen (2012) the costume balls at the Russian Academy of Arts between 1885 and 1909 were events that “inspired exuberant experimentation in costume design” (30), which were based on concepts, objects or parts standing for a whole and paved the way for costuming to become an outlet for personal opinion and originality. By the 1920s and 30s, this modernist approach to costume play led to the fancy dress parties, the Beaux Arts balls of Europe and here in Australia the Sydney Artists balls, becoming avenues for the ‘bright young things’ and the avant garde set to express their ‘modern’ ideas and challenge authority (Jarvis 1984, Buchart 2012, Beck 2013).

After the austerity of the Second World War, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was the catalyst for the re-emergence of fancy dress parades and parties in the United Kingdom. This interest was short lived due to the emergence of television when entertainment became centered in the home and interest in fancy dress waned. However, fancy dress started a revival in the 1970s when some of the characters from popular television shows and later blockbuster films, such as Star Trek and Star Wars respectively, became staple fancy dress characters and commercial costumes became easily available.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, as in time past, people still like to base their costumes on a mixture of historic, traditional and/or popular characters, such as a
doctor or vampire, Lady Gaga or Darth Vader. According to McQuillen some people will veer towards fancy dress costumes that are “conceptual” i.e. embody ideas and/or ‘synecdochic’ i.e. has parts standing for the whole, as forms of sartorial self-representation” (2012). From this broad palette of styles and ideas, we are continuing what, for example the Venetians through to the Victorians through to the ‘bright young things’ of the Roaring Twenties and beyond did, which is to use fancy dress costuming as a response to and/or reflection of mores and ideology of our specific era and culture. In other words, fancy dress is a way for people to embody in their outfits what they see around, such as being an iPad, or poking fun at politics or religion, or parodying celebrities or stereotypes. It can therefore be characterized neither as simply hegemonic nor rebellious; this is dependent on the context and the participants.

A fancy dress *faux pas* can result in serious or embarrassing consequences for individuals or groups who make the ‘wrong’ choices of costuming and themes. These sartorial errors or politically incorrect party themes can cause consternation and make the news headlines when the sensibilities of the day are inadvertently or blatantly ignored. For example in 2005 Prince Harry dressed in Nazi uniform at a private function and was publically reprimanded in the press for dressing inappropriately and forced to apologize (Tweedie and Kallenbach 2005). Another fancy dress story that made the news and was closer to home was the 2014 Christmas staff party at the University of Sydney. The party was to have a Mexican theme and some members of the university community forwarded objections on the grounds of racism and discrimination. The theme was cancelled, but not the party (Hill 2014). These two stories illustrate that fancy dress still has the ability to shock and push the boundaries
of the hegemonic values of the day and indicates that as a hyperreal dress code based
on fun there are still rules to follow. These two stories also highlight how tenuous
privacy is as a concept because everything is now subject to being captured on a smart
device and beamed through the ether to a news hungry world. It illustrates how a
simple bit of private fancy dress fun can blur the boundaries of appropriate
inappropriateness and challenge notions of what is the private/public domain. Again,
these types of stories are examples of how current fancy dress is as a barometer of an
era’s political interests, its technologies and cultural mores.

**Fancy Dress today**

Part of the appeal of fancy dress costuming for adults today is that it is has the
potential to be a fun social activity where one can create a temporary pastiche of a
fantasy figure and if so desired, role-play elements of that character, simply by putting
on an ‘out of the ordinary’ outfit. At a fancy dress event the participants understand
costuming as a marker of difference from the everyday and these changes in
appearance are supposed to be a trigger for fun and high jinks. This otherness gives an
impression of temporary unity among the friends, acquaintances and strangers who
may be in the mix of people at the given event. However, not all fancy dress
occasions are dens of orgiastic frenzy or raucous role-play and the ambience at the
gatherings can range from subdued to fun-filled frivolity.

In contemporary Australia some of the occasions where fancy dress costuming is
worn includes themed parties, Halloween and New Years Eve as well as corporate
and community social functions, hen and stag nights, fund raising events and national
and international sporting events. Judging by anecdotal evidence from peers and colleagues, articles in the media (Stanley 2012, Hill 2014, Hooper 2014) and the array of hire shops and on-line retail sites such as Fancythatcostumes, costumedirect and the Wardrobe, Sydney. Fancy dress appears to be popular among a cross-section of Australian society. For example fancy dress parties are part of the social scene at many universities indicating that younger people enjoy dress-up too. On a personal note, this year I have already been to three fancy dress events in my locale with different social groups and ages that include a twenty-first birthday held on the Central Coast in New South Wales, a fiftieth birthday in Manly and an ABBA harbour cruise in Sydney.

**The study group: Rent-a-Crowd**

My thesis is a study of the fancy dress practices and experiences of a social group of English/Australian and Australian Baby Boomers in Sydney. Self-devised groups of middle-class friends, such as Rent-a-Crowd, are known as an” affinity group” (IPOS McKay report 2005). The full cohort of persons who identify as Rent-a-Crowd can be up to thirty people at a major event but usually they meet up in smaller numbers, for example at dinners or music gigs. The majority of the friends live in the northern suburbs of Sydney, with offshoots on the Central and North Coasts of New South Wales. They are a mixture of professional, self-employed and skilled workers, identify as heterosexual and are either married or divorced with a 50/50 gender ratio. I have been part of Rent-a-Crowd since 1990.
Although not a formally recognised affiliation with a specific purpose, this group coagulated through serendipitous circumstance and opportunity as the first members drifted over to Australia from England and formed friendships during the 1970s and early 80s. They were a mishmash of itinerant young men and women who were travelling the world for pleasure, adventure and work. Although the core comprises a nugget of long-term friends there has been and still is a certain amount of fluidity as people come and go depending on work, family and personal commitments.

The origin of the name Rent-a-Crowd is rather hazy, but this version as described by Biker one of the early arrivals, is the stock explanation:

We were all just friends who’d met. There might be friends of friends, tourists and travelers, nearly all of us English, one or two Australians who’d married in [laugh]. The main base was one house in Paddington [an inner city suburb of Sydney] where a whole crowd lived; thirteen of us lived there in one house. We used to meet on Friday or Saturday nights and there would usually be somebody who knew that there was a party going on. In those days it wasn’t too bad to gatecrash parties, so we used to all go along to a party. Sort of thirty people at a time; we were sort of known as Rent-a-Crowd ’cos we made the party about twice the size.

Sometimes they would dress-up to go to a party to make it more fun, thus setting a precedent for the tradition of fancy dress costuming, celebrating and ‘having a laugh’ which became woven into the fabric of the friendship group. As a group, Rent-a-Crowd have been organizing and participating in fancy dress parties for over twenty-five years and this project draws on some of the diverse stories from selected members of the group.
Rent-a-Crowd was also a surrogate family for many people and early on was an important social network. Punk, another Rent-a-Crowd pioneer, explains that part of the strength and a reason for the longevity of the group is that:

Rent-a-Crowd has been our family basically. It’s been a constant in our lives. When we all met we were all our twenties, no children, some with different partners to now or the same partners…but basically many Christmas and many holidays, many Easters, many functions together. Good times and bad times together because none of us had mums or dads or brothers and sisters around. Whatever they did they tended to do en masse, which really hasn’t changed a lot over forty years.

I will explore the theme of migrant networks and in particular the English diaspora in Australia in Chapter 3 *The Bus Party*, named after a 2013 event celebrating both the longevity of the friendships and British and English heritage. These individuals now have the means, time and enthusiasm to enjoy full and active social lives, which includes travel, concerts, dining out as well as fancy dress parties. At the ‘drop of a hat’, members of Rent-a-Crowd will don dress-up costumes for birthdays and dinner parties, royal weddings and jubilees as well as themed work or social functions. Some in the group have their own dress-up boxes with costumes, accessories and wigs collected and saved for future use. The contents of these dress-up boxes function as a communal resource as people will know that X has that long blonde wig or Y has the black sequined sheath dress, and friends will ask to borrow these items for a particular party. This sharing helps to give continuity to the group via the movement of material objects and it is fun to see the communally owned grotesque false breasts crop up on different people at various parties. There are some interesting tales attached to them, which I will elaborate in Chapter Two, *A Frolic of Fancy Dressers*. 
One may get the impression that everyone in the group has a *gung-ho* attitude to fancy dress but this is not so. Some individuals relish dress-up while at the other end of the spectrum some stubbornly refuse to dress-up for events but go along anyway because they are part of the group. Are there consequences of not being in fancy dress at a Rent-a-Crowd themed party? There appears to be none and no one is ostracized or denied entry. It is even a running joke that some individuals are exceptionally apathetic fancy dressers and that is accommodated and even expected. For example Viking has noticed that:

Sailor doesn’t like dressing-up and in fact over the years that is part of the standing joke. It could be whatever theme for a party and Sailor would turn up in jeans and a white t-shirt and make up an interpretation that allows jeans and a white t-shirt to be acceptable.

Sailor has tweaked his appearance enough to feel in his head that he is in fancy dress but within the realms of his personality and comfort zone. He feels he has done enough to comply with what is expected and everyone knows and accepts that. He is showing that it can be the story behind the clothes that makes an outfit fancy dress rather than always having to be the case that it is the clothes that dictate the perceived level of change or transformation. This example illustrates how some of the academic literature on fancy dress misses out on understanding how subtle the complexities of fancy dress can be as a lived social practice.

Anecdotes like the above allowed me to gain insights into how members of the group conceived, produced and experienced their outfits and the parties. The interviewees discussed why certain types celebrations were chosen to be fancy dress as well as the ranges and reasoning behind the party themes. The members of the group also shared details as to how they felt and behaved in their costumes and provided a wealth of
information on which to base my thesis. I was fortunate to have a ready-made group who were willing and able to share their ideas and experiences on fancy dress with me and I am grateful to all of them.

**Methodology**

To explore the intricacies of fancy dress practice I undertook a small qualitative case study of a group of long-term friends who have been regular fancy dress participants for over thirty years. This cohort hovers around the twenty-five to thirty mark when together at functions and as a result call themselves Rent-a-Crowd. As part of this social network I have been attending fancy dress parties for more than two decades and it was this close involvement that inspired my project. I wondered about this fancy dress practice and how this activity had become a customary occurrence and mode of celebratory entertainment.

Initially I contacted a selection of friends who had shown an interest in my study, via individual email and/or telephone, outlining the topic, the reason for the study and what part they could play. Before conducting the interviews ethics approval was obtained from the University of Sydney. There were six women and five men who accepted to participate. As the interviewees are friends, the most comfortable method to gather data was with semi-structured interviews, which were recorded either individually or as couples and took place in private residences. The interview process was also an activity that the participants and I enjoyed, as it was an opportunity to reminisce on happy times and good friendships. People eagerly talked and would often laugh about their fancy dress costumes, how they felt in them, how they made
them as well as some of the antics at these parties. During some of the sessions we looked at photographs to help recall past fancy dress events, antics and costumes. I also gathered material based on notes taken from my participation observation at the parties I had recently attended as well as looking at old costumes, accessories and photographs. It became evident during the course of my investigations that this project has value as an historical archive of Rent-a-Crowd as it documents special events over many years. Individually the members have their own photographs and stories from the parties and one of the joys and strengths of this project is that it built on these different perspectives to create a coordinated picture of Rent-a-Crowd at play.

Data analysis took the form of locating common themes and exploring how the study group participated and experienced fancy dress as a form of social cohesion, celebration and community building. Two core themes emerged: exploring the role of ‘having fun’, initiated by the humour created by wearing fun fancy dress; looking at how fancy dress creates a sense of community through active participation and memory sharing.

This project can be considered a small-scale ethnography because it draws on the recollections of eleven participants as well as my own field notes and involvement over several years of Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress parties. I was drawn to ethnographic research because of its ability to bring to light material via anecdotal evidence and oral histories cultural in orientation, which then creates a rich discursive narrative of groups and individuals (Chang 2008). An ethnographic approach enabled me to go to
the direct source - the fancy dress participants - and use their stories and memorabilia as the basis of the narrative on which to analyse the meaning of the events, their practices and thoughts. According to Alexander Massey (1998), ethnography is a method of qualitative research that is the study of a culture using close engagement with the subjects and diverse forms of data collection such as interviews, field notes, artifacts and participant observation. The task of the ethnographer is to ask questions such as:

‘What does it mean to be a member of this group?’ and ‘What makes someone an insider or an outsider here?’ The ethnographer tries to make sense of what people are doing by asking, ‘What’s going on here? How does this work? How do people do this?’ and ‘hopes to be told by those people about the way we do things around here’. (Deal 1985 cited in Massey 1998)

These types of questions were the foundation of this thesis and helped to build the picture of the workings of fancy dress as an embodied cultural practice for Rent-a-Crowd. Massey (1998) points out that the intention of ethnography is to:

Contain descriptions of local places, snapshots of people’s lives and relationships, their inner thoughts and feelings, their outward appearances, anecdotes of personal triumphs and disasters, rules, contradictions and meanings. (n.p)

My ethnographic approach situates me; the interviewer at the core of the project and it is a subjective approach. Being part of this group of ardent fancy dressers is one of the strengths of this project because it meant I could tap into my many years of involvement and observation of the Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress parties. I also had access to material resources such as costumes and photographs and the one-to-one interviews with selected members of the group were both enjoyable and informative for all concerned. Part of the temporality of going to a fancy dress event or party is that you look at the photos and talk about it at a later date- it has significance that
goes beyond the time and date of the actual event. The interview process itself became an avenue for such social bonding; it was part of the remembering experience of fancy dress.

This study feeds into the growing interest within the humanities in the senses, in auto- and sensory ethnography (Chang 2008, Ellis, Adams and Bocher 2011, Pink 2015) and material culture (Prown 1982, Slater 2014, Woodward and Fisher 2014). These emerging fields gave me the structural tools to explore the intricacies of fancy dress practice from a personal, social and physical perspective. In this study I could not divorce myself from being part of Rent-a-Crowd and have used this relationship as the foundation to build an intimate picture of the fancy dress practices of this cohort. Auto-ethnography, which is an emerging qualitative research method that draws on the author’s personalized style and experiences to understand and discuss a social practice or cultural phenomenon, suited the parameters of my project because it enable me “to connect with people on the level of human meaning” (Wall 2006, 10). As to the reliability of anecdotal material from interviewees because as Chang (2008, 5) points out:

Memory is both a friend and foe to …ethnographers, it allows researchers to tap into a wealth of data…[But memory also] selects, shapes, limits and distorts. Memory fades as time goes by, blurring the vitality of the details.

Using a triangulation of methods that complement the interviewees’ stories, such as looking at the material evidence of costumes and photographs, hearing about the same party/costume from different perspectives as well as my own enculturation in Rent-a-Crowd, gives credence to the data and helps to counter the ravages of memory fade. Indeed, the multiple perspectives unearthed by ethnography are less of a problem than
a source of richness since the purpose of ethnography is to investigate the levels of meaning that shape the behaviour and belief system in a particular group; this is done by studying artifacts, observation and personal contact in the field.

Material culture looks at the meaning and impact of the artifacts of a group, and/or an individual. So called material cultures approaches were “developed to solve the long-standing problems involving the relationships between the social/cultural and the material” and looked beyond the economic and social significance of objects (Woodward and Fisher 2014, 4). In this study the materiality of making and wearing the costumes was an important part of the fancy dress experience for the participants and they used these garments in the context of the parties “to externalize particular cultural identities” that of being part of Rent-a-Crowd (ibid, 2014).

Sensory ethnography is a process that maps out how different groups and cultures utilize the senses to determine how they impact on practices and activities. According to anthropologist Sarah Pink (2015, 4) sensory ethnography is:

A critical methodology, which… departs from, the classical observational approach…is a reflexive and experimental process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced.

My ethnography foregrounds the sensory dimensions of the lived experience. Sensory ethnography can be used to examine how ideas and beliefs are lived on and through the body. Fancy dress works in tandem on the body and in the imagination. Fancy dress it is worn next to the skin so has texture and form that is embodied but is also a visual or in some cases an auditory feast. For example, I was dressed in a hired Star Trek uniform at Duchess’s fiftieth birthday party, which was space themed. I
remember enjoying looking as if I had stepped out of the *Star Trek* show and the confining red and black thick jersey all-in-one pantsuit had an air of formality about it. In other words I did not float and flounce about in it but stood straight and tall. The outfit also had a slight musty smell and I was aware that I was not the first nor would I be the last person to wear this suit. I also had an iconic *Star Trek* communicator badge that bleeped when I pressed it and I got a lot of ‘Beam me up Scotty’ quips from my friends. All these elements came together to produce my embodied fancy dress experience and the whole party was great fun. This anecdote illustrates how one cannot extricate all the senses from the practice and experience of fancy dress. For my interviewees how they looked, felt, and moved in their fancy dress was a recurring topic and is an important part of their fancy dress experience.

If one takes the body out of the costume, one is left with limp incongruent pieces of a sartorial puzzle that has little meaning, but put the body in the costume, in context and in company and the fancy dress cocktail fizzes. The afore mentioned emerging fields opened up new ways of exploring the experiences of fancy dress practice and show that there is more to costume parties than escaping into an alternative persona as traditionally posited in scholarly literature.

**Concepts and theoretical framework**

This study aims to contribute to a void in research into fancy dress practices and to add valuable knowledge about the socio-cultural aspects of dress. To my knowledge there are no known studies that have explored the motivations and
experiences of adult fancy dress parties and costuming as a social and community activity in Australia.

Fancy dress has a broad palette of applications and meaning in different parts of the world. For example an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh explored the way artists incorporated fancy dress into their paintings and photographs. The accompanying book called *Van Dyck in Check Trousers: Fancy Dress in Art and Life 1700-1900* (Stevenson and Bennett 1978) focuses on the history of fancy dress as a social pastime and is an important work in this field.

In North America, Halloween is the foremost occasion for fancy dress. This has been studied extensively and it can trace its origins as a pagan festival to ward off evil spirits by using masking, mischief and revelry. The Irish and Scottish migrants transported the Halloween traditions to North America in the nineteenth century and it has now evolved into an “escapist extravaganza” that appeals to children and adults. Nicholas Rogers (1995) sees that Halloween in North America has become enmeshed in consumer culture and draws on Hollywoodesque imagery of horror and violence rather than humour and play as its dominant tropes (477).

Another exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, *Absolutely Mardi Gras* (1997), and accompanying book by Glynis Jones’s, documented Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The exhibition included a photographic archive of the event and set it in the context of its radical origins. The Sydney Living Museums held an
exhibition in 2002, of children’s fancy dress with many items being sourced from the community as well as archival material from the Powerhouse Museum.

There are archival records and photographs available at state libraries in Australia of costumed events: the grand fancy dress balls and civic functions, the private parties and community events of the late nineteenth century and early to mid-twentieth century. These sites are a useful resource for looking at the occasions and the types of costumes worn but do not attempt to unpack the complexities or the social significance of fancy dress. My study required a more conceptual engagement.

Clothing is such a normalised and vital part of everyday for many societies that knowing what to and how to wear the right thing at the right time is an important learnt skill that is part of our social conditioning. In order to situate fancy dress as a form of display and/or resistance or a vehicle for celebrating it is important to understand why we wear clothes at all. There are three different schools of thought that investigate the origins and function of clothing and adornment.

James Laver (1969) in Modesty in Dress claimed that modesty was seen as the prime reason for clothing (9-11), arguing that every society evolves its own system of what is appropriate for each gender to wear. What is considered modest in one culture is regarded as wanton or inappropriate in another and he argues that there is no universality to modesty.
The second theory is the adornment theory, which is widely accepted among scholars. It was put forward by Thomas Carlyle ([1831], 1967) in *Sartor Resartus* and proposes that all human societies dress, adorn, embellish and enhance the body according to their encultured belief system to show place, status, and gender role their community (Flugel 1950, Roach and Eicher 1965, Entwistle 2000). According to Joanne Entwistle (2000), the dressed or adorned body gives the individual meaning and identity in their social world by making them appear appropriate, acceptable, respectable and even desirable (7). Flugel, in his seminal work *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) supports the widely held view that decoration is the prime motive for clothing. He conjectures that it is “from the clothes that we form a first impression of our fellow creatures as we meet them” (15).

The third theory centres on protection. Clothing could be conceived as protecting both the body and the soul. It protects the physical body from the weather, enemies or animals but has a role in warding off spirits and bad magic (Flugel 1930, 70-71). Although the protection theory proposes that the primary function of clothing is to protect us from the ravages of the elements, the environment and enemies, some societies do survive in harsh conditions of heat or cold where the people wear little clothing, such as the indigenous people of Australia, where it can be extremely hot during the day and bitterly cold at night. Charles Darwin famously observed that the Yahgans of Tierra del Fuego (at the tip of South America) walked about naked in the inclement weather and slept naked, coiled up on the wet ground (Barnard 2000, Entwistle 2000). The above theories offer useful ways to understand the origins of dress and adornment as well as showing that the form and function of clothing is always shaped by the sensibilities of era, society and culture.
So where does fancy dress costuming fit into these schemas? It certainly toys with notions of modesty, it is definitely about adornment and it originated as a means of protection as well as a being a conduit into the mystical and magical realms. Today fancy dress is about those first impressions when people are deliberately presenting an ‘out of the ordinary’ façade but under the non-threatening auspices of good humour. Fancy dress is therefore a hyperreal form adornment and display. Although it is a real-time activity with real people wearing real clothes, the ethos behind the practice is exaggeration, trickery and amusement. Anthea Jarvis, in her history *Fancy Dress* (1984), argues that there is a “basic human need for such an outlet as fancy dress and its appeal is timeless” (34). She believes that fancy dress can be moulded to fit the needs of the wearer’s imagination and is a “harmless, legal and quite delightful way of being ‘different’ for a night” (3). This is the tip of the investigatory iceberg. My study looks at what lies beneath the frou-frou of fancy dress and has found that it is a complex activity that can be an outlet for creativity, test organizational skills, build and sustain some communities and is loved by some people and loathed by others. In other words this “basic need” is not needed or enjoyed by everyone and is also shaped by the socio-economic and cultural practices of era and place.

The role of dress as part of social or cultural practice has often been seen as a secondary part of a study. As Yarnal et al. argue:

> When dress does emerge as a component the significance is often lost because the study is focused on another topic. Dress emerge[s] as an outcome of the study rather than an integral contributor. The way that dress shapes the self, gives public meaning to the body and situates it within a culture, its embodiment has garnered limited attention. (2011, 54-59)
Anthropologist Gregory P. Stone broke new ground when he combined the idea of
dress as a form of communication with his views on socialization, which he built into
his symbolic interaction theories. In his essay Appearance and Self (1965), he coined
the terms ‘anticipatory’ and ‘fantastic’ socialization. He uses these terms in his
discussion on how a child develops a sense of self through acting out different roles
through play. Anticipatory socialization is when a child acts out roles that they could
possibly take up in later in life, such as parent or teacher, while fantastic socialization
is when:

The child acts out roles that can seldom, if ever be expected to be adopted or
encountered in later life, such as a cowboy or Indian. (1965, 237)

This latter type of social play cannot usually be accomplished without a costume, as
acting out and dressing the part is an integral part of the fantasy as it helps to
symbolically leave the everyday self behind. Stone describes the costume as a “kind
of magical instrument” (1965, 237), as it enables the playing child and the viewer or
coplayer to collude in the pretence, i.e. dressing-up helps build a sense of self. Fancy
dress works on the surface as a form of celebrating temporary fakeness and can
embody parody but pretend play but does not fundamentally transform the ‘authentic’
self.

Joanne B. Eicher (1981) built on the concepts of social interactionist theorists of
Stone (1965) and Goffman (1959) and explored the relationship between identity and
dress. She developed the framework of a tripartite self: the public, private and secret
self. According to her hierarchy the public self dresses for reality in order to reveal
occupation, age and gender; the private self dresses for relaxation and social activities
and can include dressing for fun; and the secret self dresses for intimate fantasies.
However the secret self clothed in fantasy dress is not always sexual and can include athletic, situational or occupational fantasies. This is an unusual inversion of the classic equation in which the inner self is seen as authentic and the outer as constructed and performed. But how useful is Eicher’s model of dress as reflecting the different forms of selfhood in regards to fancy dress?

Fancy dress actually combines the playful, the secret and the public in ways that are quite different from the equation between the public and the serious, real self. It inverts that. The public self is not always serious and the fantasy self is not always private and that is what brings a sense of danger and fun to fancy dress. If one wanted to apply Eicher’s three-part model of selfhood to fancy dress one would say that fancy dress is an amalgamation of the public, private and secret self and clothes; it is a combination suit woven from the threads of reality, fun and fantasy.

Actually fancy dress suggests that this model of three types of self may be too simple. Fancy dress does not obliterate the essence of the player but rather reveals the multiplicity of our identities (Tseelon 2015). In other words we know that we are playing pretend but we are still ourselves and that is what makes it fun and enjoyable.

Annette Kuhn, for one, has argued that fancy dress points to the ‘fakeness’ of all dress:

As a cultural form, fancy dress gestures with some urgency towards the performative aspect of clothes. Indeed it renders this aspect entirely overt: for the point of fancy dress is that the masquerade is there, self-evident, on the surface. Fancy dress partakes of the carnivalesque, a turning upside-down of the everyday order of hierarchies of class, status, gender, ethnicity...A fracturing of the
clothing/identity link is thus sanctioned- at once permitted and contained - that is by the cultural conventions of fancy dress. (Kuhn 2004, 123-124)

Kuhn argues that the dichotomy of fancy dress is that it is both within and without the parameters of the hegemony; in other words it is sanctioned controlled ‘mayhem’, an outlet for letting off steam, which is permissible as long as the status quo returns when the costumes come off. But to feel we have changed in some way, we need to have a backstory to our ‘look’ so we can believe our physical and sensory transformation. We need to tell who or what we are to the other revelers as well as looking out of the ordinary.

For example, I was at a fiftieth birthday fancy dress party in Manly in 2015 and the theme was ‘W’. A female friend was unrecognizable as a ‘Westie’ as she was wearing a black mullet wig, baggy ‘trackie daks’ [tracksuit pants], scruffy trainers, a brushed cotton check lumberjack shirt and had a packet of cigarettes stuffed into her top pocket. She moved with a cocky swagger as she parodied an exaggerated bogan [Australian derogatory colloquial term for an un-cultured person] masculinity and was unrecognizable at first. Her sartorial joke was great fun for her and for the rest of us. She had tricked us into thinking ‘she’ was ‘he’ as well as drawing on the stereotypes of the ‘Westie’ male. However, my friend did not stay in her costume all night and later changed into a smart cocktail style dress and heels. Was this woman expressing her hidden secret fantasy or just dressing for fun and effect?

In this regard my project challenges some of the traditional work on the structures of identity that emphasizes the power of dress and appearance to reveal submersed
identities, such as the work of Gregory P. Stone (1965) Joanne B. Eicher (1981). I acknowledge the significance of these interdisciplinary scholars and have used some of their concepts as a launch pad from which to investigate the threads that connect identity construction, performative role-play and fancy dress.

**Overview of chapters**

This thesis focuses on two core aspects of fancy dress that emerged from the interviews, the first being fun and the second being community. Chapter Two explores the many faces of fun as it relates to the fancy dress experiences of the study group. *A Frolic of Fancy Dressers* is the term I devised as the collective name for a group of persons in fancy dress costume and I like to think it describes the exuberant and mischievous nature of fancy dress. This chapter explores the fun and playful side of fancy dress as a lived experience for adults. I argue that the purpose and attraction of fancy dress is that it is an activity and occasion pre-disposed to ‘fun’. At a fancy dress party, it is joining in and participating in the wearing of silly, sexy, fantastical or even minimal costumes that pre-disposes people to ‘fun’ and ‘having a laugh’. At least that is the aim, but it is not that simple. My analysis paints a portrait of the complex synergy of work, fun, danger and play at fancy dress parties in suburban Australia.

Chapter Three, *The Bus Party*, focuses on a single event and is based on the interview data gleaned from Rent-a-Crowd. It is a collection of their experiences at the Bus Party of 2013, which was to celebrate the sixty-fifth birthday of Biker, who is one of the founding members of the group.
This extraordinary event was an example of how fancy dress facilitated community cohesion as well as being a conduit for expressions of nostalgia for the halcyon days of youth. It was also a celebration that was rich in symbolism and homage to all things British. This chapter documents and shows how fancy dress can be a fun vehicle for building and sustaining communal coherence while providing a platform for individual sartorial flair and humour. I have used the themes of diaspora, nostalgia and heterotopia to analyse the complexities of meaning embedded in the Bus Party. My aim is to explore how this fancy dress party was a hedonistic social ritual that imbued the guests with a great deal of personal pleasure and cemented community spirit.

Chapter Four, *Fabulous Finale*, draws all the threads of this investigation together and suggests future arenas of fancy dress scholarship. The thesis showed fancy dress to be an exaggerated form of dress, which is historically and culturally situated while being able to reflect the mores and technologies of the day. The crux of my enquiry has been to explore the interplay between fancy dress practices, social celebration and community building as experienced by Rent-a-Crowd. My research showed that for this group fancy dress is an embodied real-time social practice and self produced entertainment that still contributes to the building and sustaining of these long-term friendships. It also suggested that the traditional psychological understanding of fancy dress as forms of identity play need supplementing with accounts that focus on the material, embodied and sensory dimensions of fancy dress.
Conclusion

Fancy dress costuming as a social narrative and embodied practice forms part of the gamut of everyday dress practice but differs in that it is hyperreal in its construction and purpose. This thesis has engaged in an in-depth study of the intricacies and complexities of fancy dress that draws on contemporary interest in material culture, in temporality, in the senses and sensuous ethnography. The study documented the experiences of a particular group of friends who are enthusiastic and long-term fancy dress participants. The data from the study group revealed that counter to the traditional view that fancy dress is a conduit for indulging in transformative identity role-play and revealing the private/secret self as suggested by Eicher (1981) and Miller (1997), it appeared that for this group at least, fancy dress parties were about building and sustaining community networks and having fun. However, as an embodied real-time social activity fancy dress is not a ‘one size fits all’ activity and hence the need for this particular detailed study. People at a fancy dress party can experience a range of emotions; from the pleasure of looking great and being centre stage, through to the embarrassment of being ‘overdressed’ or a costume malfunction, to pain, as in wearing an uncomfortable costume or even to the boredom or resentment of being at the party under sufferance and duty. Despite this potential for a rollercoaster of emotions, fancy dress is popular today because it is one of the sanctioned outlets in our busy modern lives when we can let our hair down and play, have fun and have a laugh.
Chapter 2

A Frolic of Fancy Dressers

The “differentness” and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in “dressing-up”. Here the “extra-ordinary” nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual “plays” another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, the openhearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably linked in this strange business of masks and disguise.

Johan Huizinga ([1938] 1955, 13)

Introduction

Rent-a-Crowd is a play community who are seasoned fancy dress frolickers.

This chapter shows the variety of ways they have of experiencing fancy dress and explores how fancy dress costuming is a prompt for amusement and social interaction. While fancy dress is a form of identity play that enables embodying fantasies it can be a conduit to build long-term social bonds as in the case of the study group and because of the nature of this group there was a wealth of stories and artifacts tucked away in their dress-up box of memories for me to draw on in the interviews. The aim of this chapter is to show how a costume gets to make its debut, its conception and production and to explore the different types of fun and amusement that fancy dress costuming and parties can generate.

Fancy dress is a combination of people and purpose, imagination and clothing. Often to enhance the ambience of the party the venue is dressed-up too and decked out with props and lighting. The music also has an important role to get people in the party mood. I propose that the fancy dress costume has a social life that starts when the invitation to the themed party arrives. From this moment the seed of the costume is ‘sewn’, as the fancy dress participant knows that they have to produce an outfit of
some kind on a given date. A party without fancy dress would be something different, have a different vibe and ambience and produce different memories. The costume and its wearer will debut and participate in a communal play activity with the aim to be both amused and amusing. The role of fancy dress partying is to play ‘let’s pretend’ and to separate people from the everyday while simultaneously creating a temporary and celebratory ‘tribe’ of revelers.

Seminal cultural theorist of play Johan Huizinga argues that there are two things at the core of play activities, 1) exceptional moments and 2) durable effects. He states being involved in a play or game activity can produce:

The feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. (Huizinga [1938] 1955, 12)

The rationale behind the structure of the next two chapters emanated from my data and builds on Huizinga’s concepts of play. This chapter explores some of the exceptional moments that are part of the palette of fancy dress and later Chapter Three is an example of the durable effects of fancy dress play as a lived experience for the study group.

**Exceptional moments**

The Rent-a-Crowd interviewees often used the word ‘fun’ to describe a variety of feelings and experiences associated with exceptional moments of fancy dress play. According to my participants they were pre-disposed to have ‘fun’ and ‘have a laugh’ at a fancy dress party because they were wearing silly, sexy, fantastical or even
minimalist fancy dress costumes. They created, contrived and concocted costumes for their personal amusement and for the pleasure of being seen by the others as well as complying with the party theme. Fancy dress it seems is all about doing, being seen to be doing and being involved.

There are many manifestations and interpretations of what constitutes and is experienced as a ‘fun time’ at a fancy dress party. For some people there is fun in the work of preparing and producing their costumes. This stage can be seen as the start of the social life of the fancy dress costume. Later, the costumes act as a conduit for community building as people coalesce into a frolic of fancy dressers and partake in the pleasures at the fancy dress party itself, such as role-play, exhibitionism and having silly conversations. There is also fun and pleasure to be had in the legacy of fancy dress and this is done by looking at photographs and reminiscing about the party and the costumes. It is also worth considering that for others fancy dress is uncomfortable, embarrassing and invokes feelings of coercion - it is the antithesis of fun.

There is an element of danger associated with fancy dress because it is a forum where the borders of culturally sanctioned decency of dress and behaviour meet. People use their dressed bodies in the context of the fancy dress party as the canvas for exploring and challenging concepts of gender, sex and even death. At a fancy dress party feelings can range from the worry that one is too overdressed for the occasion and that you will be the only one there to have made an effort through to one’s costume being too politically or sexually inappropriate. The fun is in taking these risks with
appearance and behavior but within the relatively safe environment of the fancy dress event or party. I illustrate of the risks of dangerous costuming that play with gender stereotypes and death later in this chapter. I posit that fancy dress costuming is not a one-hat-fits-all scenario but that it is nuanced and complex and this makes it a beguiling topic to study as a social and cultural practice.

**Roadmap**

This chapter is divided into three parts and each section incorporates examples from the study group. The first section - The Genesis of a Fancy Dress Costume - investigates the methods employed to prepare, discuss, acquire and produce fancy dress costumes. It also describes how fancy dress parties generate fun that helps cement social bonds. The second section - The Symbolism and Meaning of the Fancy Dress Costume - discusses the meaning and symbolism of fancy dress costuming. It takes as its starting point the widely held scholarly view that people participate in fancy dress to realise fantasies and to assume a secret or hidden identity and feel in some way transformed. However, while this is evidently true for some people, I argue that pragmatic factors such as time, effort and money alongside personality impact on the fancy dress experience. The third section - The Material Sensibility of Fancy Dress Costuming - explores the elements that constitute a fancy dress costume, such as shape, fabric and subject, and then gives examples of how people interact when in costume at the party. This section examines how sartorial wit and humour can be enacted in a fancy dress costume.
Literature review

In order to understand the meaning of fancy dress fun and to document some of the scholarly work that is being done, I will begin this chapter with a brief literature review of fun and play. This will situate my study as part of the ongoing discussion but my focus is on the materiality of fun as experienced through costuming and fancy dress parties.

Data from the study group showed that fancy dress is a prompt for fun. It was a word they all independently and frequently used to describe their fancy dress experiences. This made me realise that whatever they perceived as fun, it is an important part of this group’s fancy dress participation. Fun is seemingly easy to understand as a concept but hard to define. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have tried to unearth the meanings of ‘fun’ and its cousin ‘play’ in order to understand its social and cultural roles and uses. Taking as a starting point that fancy dress is a form of play that is fun it would help to dig a little deeper to find out what is meant and understood as fun. It can be fun to play, but is play always fun? To date, as there is such little work on fun per se I have had to situate fun as part of play and will explore how sociology, psychology, leisure studies and child development understand play for adults and children. Contemporary play analysis owes much to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga who is seen as the founder of modern play studies. Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* ([1938] 1955) is an iconic text that is based on the history and significance of play in European societies. His important work opened up the intellectual dialogue on play and his definition of play has become a benchmark for current enquiry. He argued that play is a “well-defined action which is different from ordinary life” (4) and is a central component of human
society that shapes and is shaped by its involvement in as well as the types of play activity it produces. Play, he argued facilitates creativity in the arts and sciences but exists for its own sake and involves a conscious decision of self-aware participation. He defined play as something meaningful but not serious that is “fully absorbing…includes elements of uncertainty, involves a sense of illusion or exaggeration and exists outside of everyday life” (13). Using Huizinga’s criteria one can view fancy dress as a type of play because it is non-serious, stands outside the restrictions of ordinary life, creates specialized social groupings and is bound by place and time.

The diverse and ambiguous nature of play and by extension fun, according to Gwen Gordon (2008), an educational designer and creative consultant, poses a dilemma for academics. She claims that although play has been poked and prodded by a variety of disciplines each one eventually fashions play to fit in with its own perspective. For example psychology has been interested in fun and play in regard to individual diagnosis and therapy. David Slaughter devised “The Fun Scale” (1983) as a benchmark for fun to be used in psychology and sociology with empirical research methodologies. He was attempting to quantify fun and in doing so give some gravitas to this seemingly elusive and under-researched concept. On the other hand, sociology looks at the uses and implications of fun and play in relation to community and culture. Sociologist Brian Sutton-Smith in his essay “Play and Ambiguity” (2006) argues, “there is diversity in what constitutes and is enacted as play because there is a parallel diversity in the players” (301). In other words, types and ways of play and fun are as diverse as the people who participate. Some people are drawn to forms of play, such as a sport or hobby, that are communal but equally appealing can be forms of
play that are reflective and/or beneficial and done alone. The symbiosis of the players
and the play shapes the many forms and variables of the play/fun dynamic as well as
giving it temporal and spatial diversity.

As a result of spending more time and money ‘at play’ and having fun by
participating in leisure pursuits, such as entertainment and gaming, sports and
socializing there is growing interest in exploring the function and impact of these
activities. The interdisciplinary field of Leisure Studies is a branch of social sciences
that examines how people use their leisure time and what influences their choices,
such as socio-economic status, time and culture. It applies a systematic analysis to
leisure to establish its role and lead to a better understanding and covers topics such as
also argues that leisure may serve some of the same purposes as ritual and can
valorize important ideas, groups and activities. While Leisure Studies scholars
investigate the enjoyments of leisure (Crandall 1980, Roadburg 1983), they have
assumed that the meaning of fun is understood and is subordinate to leisure, believing
that to take “leisure seriously is to enjoy seriously” (Podilchak 1991, 123-134).
Robert Stebbins (1997) suggests that there are three different levels of leisure -
serious, project-based and casual - that are enjoyed as a counterbalance and reward to
everyday work. Casual leisure, which is relevant to this project, is defined as being
intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived and pleasurable and includes relaxing,
socializing and passive entertainment but this does not mean that it is not complex.
Fancy dress is a casual leisure activity because it is short-lived, hedonic and requires
little training; it is social and pre-disposed to light-heartedness and having fun. As
Brian Sutton-Smith argues:
Dress-up play, as enacted as fancy dress costuming is an interface of subjective/mind play, social play, performance play and celebratory play. (2006, 301)

Fancy dress as a lived experience is a multi-faceted form of play. It requires a reimagining of the playful self in relation one’s social peers and gives equanimity of purpose to a celebration or event. In the context of a fancy dress party the act of costuming is intended to help everyone to participate in an activity pre-disposed to amusement and having fun.

Across many disciplines the theme of equality occurs. Sociologist Walter Podilchak (1991) suggests that fun is a social activity between equals that requires some sort of reward and emotional involvement and affects the state of mind of the person. He argues that:

Fun is an active social structuring in direct face-to-face interaction, wherein the individual is externally or interactively engaged to create an equal-with-other social human bond. The individuals are simultaneously emotionally attached in and through their structuring of an activity. (133)

This definition situates fun as an equalizing social activity in which at least two people are needed to react to a stimulus that they both find amusing. While I agree to a point, one can have fun and even laugh out loud when alone; one is still reacting to some sort of stimulus, such as a book or funny film. Fun is still a reactive response but on occasion it can be solitary. However, fancy dress fun does need the presence of others and is embodied as a self-produced egalitarian entertainment activity. It is a form of collective fun that embraces an “all for one and one for all” un-sensible sensibility. Fun, according to Podilchak, creates an almost utopian space/place and universal attitude that sweeps aside all hierarchies and unites all involved in a
community. According to the sociability literature (Riesman and Watson 1964, Bishop and Hoggett 1986, Podilchak 1991) having fun at a party is associated with new experiences and a shared definition of reality, which creates an artificial democracy of equals. Podilchak makes grand claims for the power of fun stating that it deconstructs social inequalities, is inclusive and reconciliatory. I agree that it can have that effect but the darker side of fun can involve trickery and deceit and no one wants to be made ‘fun of’ as it can involve feelings of regret, discomfort and embarrassment.

Using the lens of leisure studies one can see how fancy dress is a social and leisure activity that offers escape from the daily routines of work and can valorize or conversely satirize ideas and groups. Anthropologist Peter Stromberg (2009) suggests that play and ritual are cousins and coins the term “the play of entertainment” by which he means:

We live in a social order in which entertainment has assumed some of the significance that interactive ritual has in other societies...Entertainment is not just idle fun, but a social and cultural process through which values and commitments are generated. (13)

I suggest that the many years of Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress parties are an example of Emile Durkheim’s “ritual of collective effervescence”(cited Stromberg 2009, 105), which is, the excitement and emotional intensity generated by synchronized common activity. Their use of fancy dress as self-produced entertainment has been both a building block and a sustaining feature of the group. This is in stark contrast to the view of fun as a hedonistic self-gratifying activity that is “effervescent, only to burst into nothingness” (Podilchak 1991, 124).
So far, I have looked at play and fun as social phenomena but it is worth exploring them from other perspectives. Psychologists examine play as part of personal development and use it in a variety of therapies. Play is argued to be part of the evolutionary process and is vital for healthy and well, balanced children. They argue that play is a vital part of childhood and that it is through play that children learn how to cooperate, solve problems and express their feeling in a responsible way. Play also fosters flexibility of thought and deed and empathy with others - key elements needed for adulthood (Bekoff 2012). They believe that children should be allowed free play that is not bounded by adult rules and be allowed to take risks and understand failure. (Hughes 2011). Researchers have found that play-deprived children can manifest symptoms ranging from unhappiness to aggression (Bekoff 2014).

Psychologists also believe that there are benefits for adults to play and have fun, such as improvements in overall health and wellbeing. According to Stuart Brown (2009), a psychiatrist and pioneer clinical researcher on play:

> Humour, games, roughhousing, flirtation and fantasy are more than just fun. Plenty of play in childhood makes for happy, smart adults and keeping it up can make us smarter at any age. (n.p)

Play for adults can be instrumental in helping to reduce stress, be an outlet for creativity, help in facing adversity and give people the tools to think more clearly (Gordon 2008, Mapes 2014). (2014, n.p) goes so far as to say that fun and playfulness “are like a bubble that wards off negativity, isolation, loneliness and fear.” So it appears there are positive outcomes for having fun that have longer-term effects on our wellbeing – perhaps we have always known it was good for us. We are drawn to
the playful and the curious because they alter our perception and challenge our understanding. According to John Carroll (2004):

Things are fun when they attract, capture and hold our attention by provoking new or unusual perceptions. Things are fun when they surprise us; when they don’t feel like they look, when they don’t sound like they feel. Things are fun when they present challenges or puzzles to us. (n.p)

If this is one understanding of fun then perhaps some of the appeal of fancy dress is that it is a multi-sensory puzzle that holds our attention because it is about expecting the unexpected and is a juxtaposition of the everyday with the extra-ordinary. This incongruity is also part of what makes fancy dress a popular entertaining leisure activity.

Although these approaches show that fun and play are being taken seriously by the academy, they have not really helped me to understand what is fun about fancy dress specifically and how fun is manifest through fancy dress costuming and participation. We have to turn back to the core of fancy dress and that is the costume. The fancy dress costume is a catalyst where curiosity and play are sewn together to create an embodiment of fun. It is the presence of the bodies in the costumes that enables people to enjoy the surprises of seeing each other looking extra-ordinary and unites them in a temporary shared experience with everyone being on the same sartorial page. The following sections draw on my study data to interrogate some of the ways that the fancy dress costume is a prompt for sociability and having fun.
1: The Genesis of a Fancy Dress Costume

It all starts when you receive an invitation to a fancy dress party and realise you will have to produce an outfit to wear or at least make a token effort. The guest knows that fancy dress is a dress code based on humour, jollity, good-natured deception and light heartedness. As with other dress codes there are guidelines to follow but fancy dress is about humorously interpreting a theme or concept that has been set by the party hosts. It is then up to the individual guest to produce a suitable or even a deliberately un-suitable costume for the event.

This section investigates the genesis of fancy dress costumes by painting a portrait of the methods employed by members of Rent-a-Crowd as they plan and prepare for a fancy dress party. It also shows how important the work in preparation for costuming is for getting people in the mood and that even before the party getting ready can be a shared and communal experience that helps create and sustain social bonds.

There are many different ways that people prepare and think about their fancy dress costume before an event. For some people it can be fun, for others it can be bothersome, while others leave it right to last moment. It is interesting to compare some of the ways that individuals from Rent-a-Crowd plan for a fancy dress party. The following examples show that some people have strong views about how to create a costume and feel it is an important part of their overall fancy dress experience.
Punk’s passion for fancy dress has led her to amass an extensive collection of costumes, props and accessories. Fancy dress has been a recurring theme in her life and indeed she and her husband met at a fancy dress party onboard an ocean going liner in the early 1970s. Over the years she has attended many parties. In her local neighbourhood and among Rent-a-Crowd Punk’s dress-up collection is renowned and a much used resource:

Punk - I have a large dress up box. Anyone, numerous people will ring me if they have a fancy dress party and ask me have I got a country and western outfit, or have you got a bunny outfit or whatever and I do have lots. I have a cupboard with props which is wigs, wands, hats, silly ears, fake noses, etc., etc., and then I have a box of clothes which is used too. I do buy things when I see them in Vinnie’s and think that might come in useful one day. If I see something that is so ridiculously over the top, I think, “That’s going in the dress up box.” I never hire - never. I make lots of things.

For Punk it is a matter of principle not to hire or buy a costume and she is adamant, as indicated by her repetition of the word ‘never’. Her attitude also reflects her enthusiasm and passion for dress-up and she has organised several wonderful fancy dress parties over the years, such as the Casino Party in 2012. It is not that she is averse to spending money but she feels that bought or hired costumes restrict creativity and standardize options. As Punk indicates, her dress up box is not only a repository of costumes and accessories it is at the heart of a social network. Her dress-up hoard is a source of pride for Punk as well as a testament to years of fancy dress parties. Nothing is thrown out and some everyday clothing finds its way there when it becomes too small or unfashionable. There are items in there, such as her gold satin flared trousers, that she bought as a teenager and still wears at parties. These ‘travelling’ pants have graced her friends as well over the years. Punk enjoys the challenge of creating fancy dress costumes and it appears in her daily life too; she is
tuned into fancy dress and is always on the lookout for bits and pieces to add to her collection.

The pseudonym Punk is based on the costume she wore in 1994 at a fortieth glamour themed party. She deliberately looked ‘revolting’ as a punk, with a fake nose ring, tattered tights, a micro mini skirt, a red Mohawk wig and studded dog collar. The outfit has become her benchmark and is well remembered by all who saw it. The humour of this costume relied on the wearer being middle-class and sending up a sub-culture that Punk and her friends were not part of. For some people her outfit was their everyday wear and would not have been seen as either funny or a fancy dress costume in other circumstances.

![Figure 1: Buzz and Punk.](image)

(Photograph used with permission of the participants)

While Punk relishes the challenge of an upcoming fancy dress party, Hippy, on the other hand, finds it bothersome to plan and prepare a costume. However, she knows
she is obliged to attend a Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress party because she is part of the
group and does not want to let her friends down. Her approach to costuming is
pragmatic. One fact she has to take into consideration is her size; she is not very tall
and hired or ready-made costumes would not necessarily fit. As she has attended
many fancy dress parties over the years she also has an extensive dress-up box at
home. What she is most concerned with is having an authentic experience while
playing dress-up and feels it is cheating to hire or buy a total look:

    Hippy - To me getting something from the shops is like cheating somehow.
    It’s the easy way out. It’s that make do and mend attitude that I grew up with.
    If you do it yourself it’s a more authentic experience. It’s cheating if you have
to go and get it.

It is interesting that she uses the terms ‘authentic’ and ‘cheating’ in the context of
fancy dress, which is all about pretence and being inauthentic. Her use of the term
‘make do and mend’ alludes to the slogan that was used during the austerity of the
Second World War. As a Baby Boomer, Hippy’s childhood would have been during
the transition from rationing and the meteoric rise of consumerism for all and this
attitude of self reliance and making do reveals itself in her fancy dress practice. Her
work in preparing for the playtime at the party before is part of her feeling authentic
or worthy but she acknowledges she reaps the rewards by having fun at the party. The
attitudes of Punk and Hippy, though different, imply a superiority of purpose in their
quest for a costume, suggesting that people who hire or buy a cheap ready-made are
taking an easier and more expensive path to fancy dress fun. Despite their almost
puritanical approach I can vouch that these two women always have innovative
costumes and have great fun by immersing themselves fully in the carnivalesque spirit
of fancy dress. Work and fun are, it seems intertwined.
For those members of Rent-a-Crowd who hire costumes, pre-party dress-up play can be an opportunity for fun and sociability:

Gypsy - I end up going to the costume hire place and often I’ll go with others so that becomes a bit of a mini party in itself. It’s a bit of fun to go in and try on all sorts of different costumes. You work out what mood you want to portray on the night. There might also be a bit of time spent in the two-dollar shops trying to get some extra accessories to go with whatever you’ve got.

In the environment of the hire shop and with a few friends, she plays dress-up. They try on costumes and may interact with other customers and the staff. It is a time to show off, role-play and lark about. It is a precursor for the forthcoming party and there is pleasure in anticipating what impression one will make with the costume. For Gypsy and her friends there is enjoyment in this sociable preparation for a fancy dress party. The advantage of hiring is that there is a wide range of bespoke costumes and props available and one could get very elaborate outfits that would be impossible to create at home. For Gypsy and her friends it is worth spending a fair amount of money for the thrill of wearing an exotic or unusual costume.

These three examples show only a few of the ways that some of the study group create and prepare for costuming. Everyone agrees that there is work needed to produce an outfit, even a minimal one. However, I am not saying that one way is better than another or that spending lots of money makes for a ‘better’ costume. I have shown that even before the party the creative process of costuming has the power to build social bonds in an enjoyable way and that anticipation is an important part of the fancy dress experience.
2: Fantasy ‘secret selves’ and flirting with danger

This section argues that there are other factors involved in the fancy dress experience apart from the reason generally advanced in much of the academic literature that people do it to assume a secret or hidden identity and to be temporarily transformed. Academics such as Stone (1965), Eicher (1981) and Miller (1997) support the dominant argument that playing dress-up enables people to reveal secret identities and fantasies. While this approach has some truth and value it has some problems such as not regarding pragmatism, obligation and sociability as motivators for fancy dress costume choices. Although some people do use fancy dress as an opportunity for revealing secret fantasies and feeling temporarily transformed, others like to make a comic statement or wear fancy dress only because it is the dress code for the party. Other people may take a more conceptual or lateral approach to their costuming and finally there are those who do the absolute minimum or nothing at all. So fancy dress is not a one-size-fits-all activity. I argue that feeling transformed and revealing fantasies is part of dress-up play but there are other ways to have fun with fancy dress, such as enjoying seeing people in costumes, enjoying having one’s costume looked at and commented on or being part of a team or pair that is telling a story, for example being dressed as the Three Little Pigs or Batman and Robin.

One cannot deny that part of the appeal of fancy dress costuming for adults is that one can create a temporary pastiche of a fantasy figure and role-play in real-time elements of a character, simply by putting on an ‘out of the ordinary’ outfit. When adults indulge in fancy dress they know that they are playing a game of social fantasy and their costume choices are shaped by their personality as well as their purse strings.
The clothing we wear has always been used as a marker of who we are, how we think and where we fit in and I believe that fancy dress carries those signals too.

I return here to Eicher’s three concepts of self as discussed in Chapter One. While Eicher does not see the secret self as only sexual she nonetheless does propose that it can include “seductive lingerie or tight undergarments or trousers for men” (1981, 40) as well as items that people would wear for Halloween or Mardi Gras if they appear anonymously in public. This may include a small amount of role-play but how the wearer feels and what they imagine the story they are telling is part of the appeal of fancy dress.

This question of different aspects of the self that are performed before others is made more complex if one gives serious thought to the question of whether a fancy dress party among longstanding good friends is, in fact, a public or private event. This type of fancy dress party is an ambiguous situation that cannot be neatly categorized as either public or private. While on the one hand it is private in the sense that the guests are invited and are known to the hosts, it is simultaneously public in so far as it is a social occasion that relies on there being a group of people present. It also has an element of the public about it because the space itself has been somewhat transformed for the event. No longer is it simply someone’s living room; it has turned into a shared social space that gives context and meaning to the fancy dress party. A suburban living room can be dressed up to become the performance arena where the guests display their costumes and socialize. The guests bring the outside social world into the privacy of the home temporarily changing its use from the everyday to special. The suburban house is also subject to having a public, private and secret life that is
shaped by the context and like Eicher’s three forms of self can express different facades depending on how it is ‘dressed’ and who is present. The transient and chameleon nature of fancy dress impacts on both the guest and the venue and plays an important part in marking the fancy dress event as ‘extra-ordinary’.

Kimberly-Anne Miller, in her American study investigating dress-up play, “Dress: Private and Secret Self-Expression” (1997), combined Eicher’s framework of dressing the public, private and secret self with Stone’s fantastic socialization theory. Building on Eicher’s concept that we dress to reflect our public, private and secret selves, Miller focused her attention to the role of fun and fantasy in fancy dress costuming. She argued that public costumes are worn at festivals and are not anonymous, private costumes worn among friends and by children and secret costumes are worn with intimates or alone but do include public anonymous costumes. Miller (1997) introduces the idea that the costumed secret fantasy self can appear unmasked at a public event, such as a fancy dress party. Using this model, fancy dress costuming coalesces the private/secret self with the public. In other words wearing fancy dress gives people a temporary opportunity to be anything they wish in the safe confines of the ambiguous public arena of the fancy dress party.

Both Eicher’s and Miller’s theories are based on the concept of there being an essential self that has different facets depending on circumstances. In discussions on the meaning and symbolism of fancy dress costuming the perceived wisdom is that it is a kind of “magical instrument” (Stone 1965, 237) that is a conduit for transformation and displaying fantasy identities. In particular, Miller’s survey 1997 of fancy dress found that women were more likely than men to have sexual fantasies
about dress (231). On the other hand an early (1979) study of college students found that males were more likely to choose costumes with novelty and sexual leanings (Hill and Relethford cited Miller 1997, 226).

Both Eicher and Miller work with an understanding of clothes as revealing and expressing some hidden element of self when it comes to sexual fantasies specifically. I’ll return to this in a moment but my study showed that sometimes something much more practical is going on. Sometimes, costume choices were initially determined by the theme of the party and then by pragmatics such as what they had readily available at home (which is my modus operandi for fancy dress), what they could borrow or what they could hire. Others would make or sew and some would buy. The role of chance, pragmatics and theme were important in determining a costume and for my participants fancy dress was not regarded an opportunity for a spontaneous emanation of a form of ‘self’. Nonetheless, chance, pragmatism and a unique take on a theme resulted in a memorable fancy dress performance.

But there is no denying that the physicality of embodying a costume, such as its weight, fabric, subject matter or amount of skin revealed or concealed, impacts on the wearer and makes them feel different. The difference is that looking different from the everyday in fancy dress is temporary and superficial. This may include a small amount of role-play but how the wearer feels and what they imagine the story they are telling is part of the appeal of fancy dress.
Overall, then, Eicher and Miller’s view of fancy dress as an expression of a secret self does not get at the complexities I found in my study. The delight in fancy dress can be that one does not know what is real and what is pretend and that sense of danger is part of the fun. This can be seen in the following examples: Gypsy and the leathers; and Hippy and the false breasts; and Dr. Death. Eicher and Miller do not allow for the parodic, ironic or simply tongue in cheek use of the obviously sexual image. In my study, for individuals from the study group, fancy dress is about sociability, pragmatism and a signal for feeling happy and having fun. However, that is not to say that indulging in fantasy or sexual play through costuming is not a fun or sociable or part of the fancy dress experience.

**Gypsy in Leathers**

Another example of risk taking with fancy dress was when Gypsy wore an S&M leather ensemble at the Naughty and Nautical party. She was escaping the ordinariness of everyday by dressing in clothing usually associated with the secret and intimate sphere of the bedroom or brothel. Gypsy’s costume was in place for this occasion and was following the rules of fancy dress by appearing out of place from the everyday ordinary. She was in a space and time where different rules of dress were expected and accepted but was taking a calculated risk that she had gone too far. It was dangerous play. Gypsy recalled the thrill when people did not initially recognise her and her husband in the S&M leathers at this party. She was participating in Stone’s (1965, 237) ‘fantastic’ socialization by donning an overtly sexual and stereotypical costume, which for the rest of us seemed out of character for her. She explains:
So many people didn’t recognize us in our leathers. I was amazed. You know, they were looking round the room and saying where is she? It’s quite exciting to think you actually had changed to the point you weren’t recognized. You’d obviously done a fairly good job. It was good fun.

One had no way of knowing whether this was the mode of attire she wears in secret at home or with her intimate ‘other’. Part of the voyeuristic pleasure of fancy dress is speculating what people do reveal or conceal at a fancy dress party. Fancy dress costumes such as Gypsy’s brings to the fore forbidden possibilities and questions into the minds of the viewers and onto the body of the wearer. These mental and physical risks take place within the safe constructs of the fancy dress party where these things are permissible but only for the duration of the event.

For Gypsy there was pleasure in feeling naughty in public by wearing tight and revealing clothing that reeked of unorthodox sexual machinations, not something she was known for in the group. The imagined secrets of her boudoir were on display for the amusement of the company of revelers. Her costume mixed fun and danger and was an example of the tension that Huizinga argues is an important part of play. He states that “tension means uncertainty, chanciness: a striving to decide the issue and so to end it” ([1938] 1955, 10). The tension was that her costume could have been misunderstood in a different context such as on the public street or in a burlesque club. When the ‘penny dropped’, her subterfuge not only heightened her pleasurable experience but relieved the tension that her costume idea would misfire. Here in the safety of a friend’s fancy dress party- this costume was risqué but fun. Gypsy felt safe enough within this cohort to reveal an S&M fantasy and no doubt part of her fun at this party was to be superficially and temporarily transformed.
There is no doubt that fancy dress is a game of creative and amusing sartorial self-expression that can include visual trickery. It is a public arena in which to play with the ideas of a secret self of many guises. The point is that the viewer would not usually have insights into the wearer’s fantasy life but fancy dress is a peepshow and a socially sanctioned form of play based around the idea of a secret self. In the above example, Gypsy controlled the joke about her imagined secret life and was laughing with her cohort as opposed to being laughed at. Fancy dress’s egalitarianism is that everyone takes a sartorial risk to some degree and that puts everyone on the same page, in the same place for the same time.

Gypsy’s S&M leather costume in the context of the Naughty and Nautical party suggests that Eicher’s concept of the public, private and secret self is too neat, at least too neat for fancy dress. For Eicher fantasies are embedded via dress only in the private sphere; the public sphere is the place for serious reality. Fancy dress mucks this around. It does not simply invert it, it makes the distinctions hard to discern, hence the fun and danger. The public self of Gypsy revealed her gender and status in the group, the private self was dressed for relaxation and fun among her friends while the fancy dress costume foregrounded her sexuality in an unorthodox fashion within her peer group, something that is usually revealed only to an intimate or behind closed doors and alone. Through the medium of fancy dress Gypsy embodied the public, private and secret self in a fantasy setting that was none the less a real-time experience. She was taking a social risk in some ways by wearing this costume but it also increased her social standing in the group by showing that she had the courage to wear such a costume. She was admired for taking the risk and her outfit was part of the entertainment of the night and is fondly remembered.
As far as Rent-a-Crowd are concerned, it is about ‘being up front’ and ‘out there’ and any fantasies are to be humorously, safely and publicly shared. Safety is achieved through the familiarity of the group and also because of the nature and ambience of fancy dress, which is about good-natured social fun. I argue throughout this thesis that the driving force behind their fancy frolics is to create an ambience of belonging and to be seen and known to be themselves. Their enjoyment and fun is in being together but looking temporarily different in their fancy dress costumes. For Rent-a-Crowd, fancy dress is an example of Jennifer Craik’s (1993, 4) description of “fashion as a technique of acculturation” as they have become “visually at home with themselves in their culture”. This is because many years of fancy dress frolicking is part of their way of celebrating ‘big’ events and this has helped to build and sustain friendships. I believe that my study shows how there can be long term benefits from a seemingly frothy and self-indulgent social entertainment.

**A tale of false nudity**

Sometimes a costume becomes a legend, as with the following example, which was barely appropriate even for the context of a fancy dress party. It was fun because the costume was politically incorrect yet its incongruity and humour was a paradox that totally relied on context. Within the study group, saucy behaviour such as wearing false breasts and bottoms, occasional cross-dressing and scanty outfits has become, if not exactly normalised in the setting of their fancy dress parties but part of the way to have fun. A pair of grotesque pink soft plastic false breasts or boobs is part of the Rent-a-Crowd communal dress-up box and it is believed they originated in Punk’s dress-up box. Several people at various parties have used these false breasts and Hippy, who is a consummate fancy dresser, took up the mammary challenge at a
fortieth fancy dress birthday party. Initially, she had the breasts concealed under her
tight black zip-fronted top, but their shape and size, even covered, was eye-catching.
As the evening wore on the zip went lower and lower until there was a deliberate
costume malfunction and the full glory of the plastic breasts and erect nipples was on
full display. Hippy and a male friend posed for photographs with him openly fondling
the breasts (see Fig.2) and I am not sure if Hippy is looking aghast or amazed.

Figure 2: Hippy and ‘admirers’.
(Photograph used with permission of the participants)

However what is certain is that this behaviour was endorsed and seen as great fun by
the protagonists and the other guests. Hippy and the male friend’s behaviour would
not have occurred at any other Rent-a-Crowd social event, such as a dinner party or BBQ, or been acceptable if the breasts were real. On a personal note, although I have seen this picture many times I am still perturbed by it but can also see that is funny because it shows people I know behaving inappropriately. I deliberately included this example and the picture as it shows how the physicality and materiality of the fancy dress costume impacts and shapes the embodied experiences for both the wearer and the viewer.

The disturbing value of the above photograph relies on the juxtaposition of the dressed and undressed body and the underlying paradox whereby Hippy is dressed but looks naked. The naked body is heavily policed and politicized and there are strict rules as to where and when it can be seen. For fashion academic Jennifer Craik (1994), clothing is a combination or conversation between concealment and revelation. The false breasts did both; they revealed the fakes and concealed the natural while implying that the fakes were corrupt and the natural breasts pure. Ruth Barcan (2004) has written extensively on the cultural meanings of the nude and the naked and argues that there are clothes whose function is to make the body appear naked. Fashion and theatrical costumes have employed the use of fabrics, such as body stocking, flesh coloured fabrics and false body parts to make the dressed body appear naked. Barcan also points out that for a wearer “clothes masquerading as flesh can be highly erotic” (2004, 16) and empowering and highlight clothing as a public performance. Hippy certainly garnered some satisfaction from looking naked being dressed:

Yes, it was huge fun, very much so. I suppose I felt a bit uninhibited more than usual. I guess you wouldn’t generally uncover your breasts
in public.

Why would one not bare the breasts in public? It is considered in most circumstances taboo to uncover breasts in public because they simultaneously are regarded as symbols of nurture, sex objects when pert and young, symbols of decrepitude if saggy, and objects of ridicule if too big or small or exposed in the wrong setting (Barcan 2004, 17). By flaunting these false breasts and role-playing the sexy tramp Hippy was highlighting that the masquerade of womanliness is a construct that is skin deep that is as easily put on or taken off. Joan Riviere (1929) famously argued that womanliness is a masquerade that is based on the concept of there being an authentic inherent womanliness but the paradox, she continues, is that womanliness is itself mimicry. Hippie’s ‘falsies’ were masquerading in place of the real, but were worn as form of protective breast armour that shielded the natural breasts beneath. I argue that this costume was a powerful statement saying I am woman, look and touch but only on my terms. It could even be regarded as manipulative, by alluding to the breasts as both untouchable and touchable and preying on the heteronormative stereotype that men are unable not to stare at large breasts.

Hippy was transgressing the norms of respectability associated with being a white middle-class, sexually restrained middle-aged woman. She had manipulated her look to be different from her everyday ‘respectable’ self so that it enabled her to embody a particular version of erotic femininity as a disguise. Hippy recalls:

If you’re wearing something a bit outrageous or naughty, naughty things like a false bottom or false boobs then you’re almost obliged to behave in a way that befits your appearance. It’s a bit of a disguise behind which you can hide.
She created this character using clothing and accessories for comedic effect and wore a black top that was too small, leopard print leggings, sported an over-the-top bouffant up-do hairstyle and to top it off a pair of overlarge pink plastic breasts, with erect nipples, which strained under her tight top. She created a grotesque character by exposing false sexual body parts inappropriately. Hippy wanted to role-play this character and used costuming to become the clown figure but she was controlling the show. The fact that she had known some of the other revelers for nigh on thirty years provided her with an environment of familiarity. She felt confident that people would get the visual joke and laugh with her, but not at her; it was all up front - so to speak.

In this account Hippy recalls her experience with the false boobs:

Interviewer - Tell me about how people reacted to you.

Hippy - Quite differently. Obviously male friends wouldn’t normally come and grope my real boobs. Some men like that tarty look. Fascinating. I think men are very influenced and susceptible to what women wear. The boobs gave permission for them to behave in an outrageous way. It wasn’t about me. I think, it was more about what the boobs symbolize. A big bosomed lady in leopard skin. Yeah, obviously they wouldn’t grope a real big bosomed lady in leopard skin pants.

So it is a play for her but also a play for some of the other participants. She was creating a scenario. In this costume Hippy was indulging in fantastic socialization by role-playing the fantasy figure of the ‘tart’ but only within the context of this fancy dress party. Fantastic socialization is where people dress up in costumes, as characters that they would be unlikely to become, such as super heroes, royalty or aliens and take part in social activities. Hippy’s fancy dress costume with the exaggerated plastic breasts was an easily understood and amusing way to both challenge and confirm the norms of gender, appearance and behaviour. As Nancy Deihl (2011 cited Labarre) director of costume studies at NYU Steinhardt puts it:
Any time you're allowed to wear a costume, you're also allowed to engage in activities outside your normal behavior.

By wearing the false boobs Hippy was allowing herself and some her male friends at the party to be lewd and crass, but only in the context of the party for the sake of ‘having a laugh’. One could ask if is this harmless fun or is it a form of misogyny and middle-class snobbery veiled as fun? It is part of the topsy-turvy nature of fancy dress which was never politically correct; it mocks, apes and alludes to all the social hierarchies, above and below, near and far. Hippy was deliberately presenting herself as a pastiche of an undisciplined and uncontrolled female body. Can this be funny or is it just conforming to stereotypes? Fancy dress relies on people recognizing stereotypes such as the superhero, the fallen woman, and figures of authority, the macabre and grotesque as it is a visual form of communication where looks and looking are everything. This is why fancy dress is so reliant on the context of the party or event and reaffirms the experiences of commonality and community.

By wearing the large false breasts Hippy was an embodiment of Bakhtin’s grotesque body as interpreted in his readings of the medieval text of the carnivalesque Rabelais novels. The grotesque body “transgresses its own limits…and is an incarnation of the world at the absolute lower stratum” (Bakhtin 1984, 26-27). The grotesque is an aperture through which the world enters and leaves through the mouth, the nose the genital organs and the breasts. The grotesque body is unruly and excessive and transgressive. Hippy’s exaggerated costume was a grotesque and negative caricature with an “inappropriate, protruding body part, gigantic dimensions and fanciful anatomy” (Tseelon 1992, 302). As feminist scholars have long noted, it was a way for
Hippy to embody the comic, the playful and the erotic in the safe confines of the controlled and temporary occasion of a fancy dress party. In doing so it drew on the particular classed associations of the female grotesque specifically. Afterwards when, life returned to normal when the crazy costume came off, Hippy felt she regained her everyday composure and respectability but felt it was great fun to be so outré. This incident reminds us of the significance of gender and sex in fancy dress play and of the particular cultural dangers surrounding gendered boundaries.

Efrat Tseelon, when discussing forms of the contemporary grotesque body, suggests, “there is a fear of the unruly, uncontrollable and disorderly feminine body” (1992, 302), observing that it is considered sensible for woman to dress in men’s clothing but it is funny for a man to dress as a woman. Perhaps this accounts for the pantomime dame being a figure of ridicule while a woman plays the principal boy, the hero. She takes the higher status because she is playing the role of the heroic male lead. While this example is about the theatre, Tseelon’s observation implies that a woman takes on a higher status when appearing as a man, while a man dressed as a woman takes on a lower status and is undisciplined and grotesque.

Nonetheless, in fancy dress men infamously leap at the chance to dress in women’s clothing. Why could this be? I posit that some of the allure of women’s clothes is that there is more variety in shape, texture and colour and seductively it can be more imaginative, exposing even unduly restrictive which helps to make it fun to wear. Generally it is taboo for men to wear women’s clothing in pubic unless there are a performer or transgender. For many men wearing women’s clothing entices a feeling
of being naughty and occasions such as fancy dress brings these fantasies into the public arena. By contrast men’s clothing generally conceals and protects like a suit of armour and is usually in somber tones and heavier fabrics. This mode of dress for men came about in what psychologist J.C. Flugel called the “Great Masculine Renunciation” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in response to the “sociopolitical upheavals of the French Revolution” (Shannon 2006, 23). This renunciation was a reaction to the flounces and frippery of the French aristocracy. This was the era that gave rise to the notion of the democratization of dress for men as they adopted simpler darker clothing, which gave rise to trousers and the modern day suit. As industrialisation continued men were severely restricted in what was deemed suitable and colour and exotic fabrics were frowned upon except for theatrical or similar performances. I argue that this dullness and uniformity is one reason why men jump at the chance to dress as women at a fancy dress party. I suggest their perceived temporary loss of male status may be a relief and it is small price to pay to have fun and the opportunity to wear the trappings of femininity in public. For example Hippy says that she has an extra large bridesmaid’s dress in her dress-up box at home, in case her husband feels the urge wear it to a fancy dress party and I have indeed seen him in it.

But what happens when a woman dresses as a caricature of a woman? Hippy in the false boobs was a woman in drag being a woman. In other words she was playing with the role of clothing as a prime form of social and cultural expression that constructed her identity. The elements that produced humour in Hippy’s false boobs outfit were the clinging top, an exaggerated décolletage, beehive hairstyle and animal print slacks. In doing so she was showing how contrived and superficial gender roles
and age identity are. Hippy was embodying what Joan Riviere (1929) meant by the ‘masquerade’ of femininity, an idea that Judith Butler (1988) elaborated into a fully-fledged theory of gender ‘performativity.’ However, with fancy dress we are often fooled by what we see - and that is what makes it fun or at the very least amusing. Hippy in the false boobs was fooling about but not being made a fool of. In the power play of gender and appearance this costume drew attention to the elements that produce a sexual woman, the breasts. This costume showed that breasts are both objects of desire and ridicule and that it is taboo to grope or ogle in polite company. According to Suzanne Labarre (2011) in her blog on the history of ‘slutty’ Halloween costumes, “costumes have always had an undercurrent of outlaw sexuality about them. Frequently, they're wrapped up in the prevailing taboos of the day.”

The parameters of polite society are stretched at a fancy dress party, but only so far. Taboos are still in place but can be played up and challenged in fancy dress. With Hippy’s example, if her large breasts had been real no one would have ogled or groped, but being so obviously false it was just about passable to play up to the stereotype of being a lecherous man and for the wearer to be a floozy. Both participants were indulging in comedic yet risky behavior even with the context of this party but it was almost an expected response to such an obvious and exaggerated parody of sexuality. This type of flirtatious encounter confirmed to the group that both players were heterosexual and attractive. However as soon as the ‘falsies’ came off and the context changed- the party ended, these flirtations ceased as life and relationships return to the normal parameters of middle-class sensibilities.
This costume with the false boobs is quite extreme in the context of a middle-class and middle-aged fancy dress party but was accepted and indeed remembered both by Hippy and her fellow cohorts from Rent a Crowd. The strength of fancy dress within the study group is that it has served as a setting for expressing fantasies and roleplay. There is always a good turn out and lots of enthusiasm for the next fancy dress party and people are comfortable enough with each other to try out various characters. It is an ongoing activity that relies on the memoirs of past fancy dress and the hope for future fancy dress thrills.

**Dr. Death**

Sometimes the deep thing being revealed is not an individual’s secret fantasy but a shared human experience as the following story makes clear. Uhuru recalls how Buzz set tongues wagging with his unique interpretation of the Dressed to Kill theme at her ‘super smart’ sixtieth birthday party:

We had no idea who was in the coffin. It was carried in and they stood it up and Buzz came out. He was Dr. Shipman, otherwise known as Dr. Death, the granny killer from Manchester. To a certain extent he was performing to a known audience but there were an awful lot of people who didn’t know him and so the shock element for them was different.

Buzz had taken a grotesque approach to his literal interpretation of Dressed to Kill, which was not the intention of the host; she had envisaged the theme as suave and glamorous as per the James Bond films. Buzz had sourced the coffin, which was a prop from his children’s school, and wore his everyday clothing but with a macabre twist. He had taken a gamble with his visual joke, which was embedded in the fact that the Rent-a-Crowd guests knew that Buzz was from Manchester and that they
would see the funny side of this performance. He is also well known for his lateral and outlandish costumes. For the other guests it would have been quite disturbing to see a realistic coffin being carried in.

This collaborative fancy dress performance was an example of the edgy and dangerous element that is present in play. It showed how make believe play can tackle the subject of mortality and take the fear out of it by making us, quite literally in this case, laugh in the face of death. Buzz as the granny killer was temporarily threatening but made us laugh at the inevitability of the transience of life and the inevitability of death. This eccentric performance by Buzz was permissible because it was in the context of the fancy dress party and the combination of props and costume was a misalliance of things that are normally separated, being brought together. His macabre performance reminded everyone that they were mortal but it also drew the assembled guests together in humour as they breathed a sigh of relief that these horrors of death in their midst, the coffin and the murderer, were fake.

Buzz’s performance could be viewed through the lens of Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque and cosmic terror because it parodied a sacred symbol of death - the coffin - and brought the murder - a bringer of death - into a celebration of life- the birthday party. Cosmic terror is a vision of the world poised on the brink of disaster and the fear it instills is used by “elites to justify hierarchies” to maintain order and subdue criticism (Robinson, 2011, n.p). Bakhtin suggests that the carnivalesque element of folk culture strips away the cosmic terror through humour and parody. He argued that the laughter “of the immortal collective body in carnival bolsters
fearlessness” (Robinson 2011, n.p) and people at this party were collectively laughing in the face of a pastiche of death. Buzz as Dr. Death was an example of the topsy-turvy and carnivalesque nature of fancy dress because it juxtaposed palpable images of death and violence in the midst of a celebration and made it funny. I remember feeling firstly unsettled when seeing the coffin and the pallbearers enter the room and then bemused relief when we realised it was ‘just’ Buzz being his usual off-the-wall self. It was an excellent joke and was the talking point for the rest of the party.

Buzz’s coffin and Dr. Death performance was also funny because there was a pull or tension between safety and danger, between life and death. He showed how fancy dress fun could be on the edge and be a dangerous form of play. The safety was being in the comfortable surroundings of the venue and being in the company of friends and peers. The danger for Buzz was being closed in the coffin and being carried into the room and lastly he was taking a risk and hoping that his prank would work. If it had not Buzz could have suffered acute embarrassment or a stern telling off from the hosts or even been asked to leave. There was no doubt that Buzz was on the edges of acceptable play for the context of this particular fancy dress party but that was his intention. This contemporary fancy dress ensemble can trace its heritage back to the festivals of death and rebirth, such as Halloween and Mardi Gras, and shows how fancy dress still sometimes tackles and pokes fun at these big issues. Buzz’s escapade at the Dressed to Kill party shows how fancy dress can function as a form of edgy play and how fun can involve a flirtation with psychological, social, cultural and physical danger.
Fancy dress is a visual puzzle that juxtaposes the everyday with the extra-ordinary. The everyday is safe and contained by the normalcy of routine while the extra-ordinary can be risky, unplanned and perhaps illogical. People in fancy dress perform the extra-ordinary by simply being in costume and ‘showing off’ to their peers. There can be delight and surprise in seeing other peoples’ costumes for the first time, which Punk laughingly called it the “oh my god, look at your outfit” moment. For the wearer there is a range of feelings associated with fancy dress such as the pleasures of enjoying the sensation of the costume to the fear of looking ridiculous and of being misunderstood. Fancy dress fun is about risk taking but within the safe confines of a party of peers.

3: The Material Sociability of Fancy Dress

Showgirls and gorillas

Fancy dress is imagined in our heads, worn on our bodies and performed to our peers. In other words it is way to embody and express the imagination though dress and then to display and share these creations in a social forum. All forms of dress and clothing say something about the nature of the wearer and the context and fancy dress is no different in that regard. The nature of dress is that it is two faced; it simultaneously reveals and conceals parts of the body. It is intimate because we feel it against our skin yet at the same time its outer face situates our gender, status, occupation and culture in the world. According to sociologist Joanne Entwistle (2000, 7):

Dress is both an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it. Operating on the boundary between self and other is the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting place of the private and the public.
We use our culturally acquired points of reference in the hope that we read the appearance of another correctly for the context of any social situation and are accepted. Jennifer Craik (1993, 4) argues that fashion is a technology of civility and status that situates us as social beings:

We use the way we wear our bodies to present ourselves to our social environment, mapping out our codes of conduct through our fashion behavior.

In this way everyday clothing or fashion may be understood as both an expression of a society’s experiences, beliefs and practices (Barnard 1996, 28) and a conduit for personal tastes and styles. Clothes are workhorses with specific and often serious tasks to perform. But John Harvey (2008) states that there is a lighter side:

The nature of clothes, as something we put on and also perform, is that we are likely to play with them as we use them, just as we play with the words we speak. Wit and humour are part of clothes because they are part of life. (104)

It would appear that clothing can tell a truth or it can lie and while keeping our secrets it is able to tell a story, almost any story to the world. Entwistle argues that being inappropriately dressed “we feel awkward, out of place and vulnerable” (2007, 7). Fancy dress plays with precisely these qualities and coalesces into a dress code of ‘mismatchedness’ for everyone. Costumes can include items of clothing or accessories that are deliberately on the boundaries of taste, be shocking or conversely deliberately ‘uber’ cute. This mx is what makes fancy dress run the gamut from humorous to amusing, controversial to light-hearted or bordering on the grotesque. In these outfits people can expect to feel awkward, out of place and vulnerable or even ecstatic, as eccentric self-presentation temporarily becomes the norm at a fancy dress
party. The fancy dress aesthetic flaunts the everyday “rules and codes [that] are inhabited through prohibitions and transgressions” (Craik 1993, 4) and makes them dérigeur for the duration of the party. The dare with fancy dress can be simply to transgress the fashion trends of the day, which is why sixties and seventies parties are so popular or to challenge the prohibitions associated with gender, such as cross-dressing or the use of grotesque false body parts. I will give an example false body parts later in this chapter.

Fancy dress is deliberately conceived and contrived to be amusing fun by playing let’s pretend to be someone or something else but not really believing it. As group of individuals united in fancy dress frolicking, the materiality of fancy dress enables a social bonding through transgressive and risk taking behavior. However, the common understanding is that everyone acknowledges that fancy dress is a celebratory social event and no one is really at real risk of long-term harm just occasional humiliation – but that is part of the fun.

What are the properties of a fancy dress costume and what are the context specific interactions, outcomes and pleasures that are enabled when wearing fancy dress? Even a simple fancy dress costume can make people hold and move themselves differently depending on the constraints and concept of the costume. At a fancy dress party the material costumes are the prompts for the wearers to engage in, if they desire, particular forms of social discourses, such as role-play and silly conversations that would not occur in ‘regular’ clothing. The costume is understood in the context of the party as a mood enhancer and conduit for having a fun time. It is expected that
most people will be on a similar sartorial page and will recognize that their peers are in fancy dress. Fancy dress is about having fun with clothes. It is a dress code that lets people play with their appearance because it encourages experimentation and display, wit and humour. Wearing fancy dress costumes lets people play with their appearance by wearing colours, styles or fabrics not normally allowed or seen in public.

But how do you recognise a costume as fancy dress? I posit that if the wearer feels they are telling an out of the everyday story with their appearance and they have produced a look for self-conscious display, they are in fancy dress. Convention alters the meaning of colours and patterns, shapes and textures depending on time and place and to a certain degree fashion. Fancy dress costumes can incorporate a range of unusual fabrics, shapes and colours, be oversized, too small, too tight or revealing, be from another era, look deliberately sexy or grubby and be accessorized with wigs, hats, masks, jewellery and assorted props. However a fancy dress costume can be a combination of everyday clothes but worn with a ‘twist’, as in the case of Buzz as Dr. Death in his macabre performance as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

A fancy dress costume is incongruous because it plays with notions of constructs of identity by deliberately making people look like something or someone they are not. Contemporary fancy dress does not have to involve masking and hiding one’s everyday identity. I think this is an important distinction to make in this context and I believe that part of the entertainment value of fancy dress is to see people you know or even strangers in incongruous outfits. However people will, for certain effects or characters cover their faces and wigs are great for changing someone’s look
dramatically as I know from personal experience when I have gone blond or worn a short black and white striped bob.

A fancy dress costume brings together elements that do not normally go together such as things are deliberately mismatched, things that are deliberately extravagant or things that are deliberately revealing or concealing. According to fashion theorist and writer Alison Lurie clothing is a language. She says that pattern and colour are akin to the tone in the voice and can “completely alter what is ‘said’ by the other aspects of the costume: style, fabric and trimming” (1981, 208). Certain colours, such as navy blue, dark grey and brown, are perceived as being serious and are the acceptable colours for work wear, while bright hues and strong colours are associated with warmer climes and social activities, such as picnics. For example strong, bright colours and loud patterns in shiny fabrics are often used in retail ready-made fancy dress costumes to distinguish the outfits from the muted hues, subtle patterns and restrained shapes of everyday current fashions. One of the joys of fancy dress for Viking is that he is able to wear bright and colourful clothes. He says:

> From my perspective fancy dress is a big rejection of fashion at the moment – which is, you walk into the city and everyone is wearing black: women are wearing black, men are wearing black suits. You step into the elevator and everyone looks as if they are going to a funeral. That’s professional city life and very boring. I like the fact that fancy dress isn’t shrouded in greyness and black; it’s a colourful, vibrant happy environment.

For Viking work clothes are the antithesis of fancy dress and he strongly associates colourful attire with having fun. He feels he is able to be more individual in fancy dress. However he is still adhering to a dress code and is just as much part of a group in costume as he is in a dark grey business suit. What is different though is his attitude
as he feels the brightness and fun vibes of a fancy dress party are reflected and shaped by the people wearing fancy dress.

The nature of a fancy dress is that fun, wit and humour are sewn into the satin clown pants, the tight wenches’s bodice or the gorilla suit. People use it as a visual language of play to indicate that they are escaping the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary. My data indicates that part of the fun of fancy dress can be that one is not totally concealed or transformed but is recognised as being oneself. But sometimes delay in recognition can be thrilling, as in Gypsy’s story recounted earlier in this chapter. It is this controlled trickery that everyone is in on that makes it fun and amusing - it is about laughing with rather than laughing at. The wearer orchestrates their performance to encourage comment and viewing by the other similarly attired participants and also appreciates the costumes of the others.

**Showgirls**

Fancy dress has elements of fun to it because it occurs in the context of the party and it is about how people react with each other, each other’s costumes and how they perceive themselves in their costume. When wearing a fancy dress costume, a change in bearing and movement can be brought about on a physical level, as for example when Gypsy and Mermaid wore sequined and feathered Las Vegas showgirl outfits at the Casino Party. They had hired the costumes and each outfit was made of shiny pink or purple satin type fabric, with a corseted bodice, which was trimmed with sequins and ribbon and a full, frilled knee-length skirt worn over several net petticoats. They both wore large ostrich feathers in their hair, sequined chokers,
fishnet tights and heels. This duo’s costumes were showstoppers and added to the illusion of kitsch and flamboyance. The physicality of the costumes, with the feathers, corsets and heels altered their physical behavior; it made Gypsy and Mermaid sashay about the party taking in the admiring looks and cheeky comments. Gypsy and Mermaid enjoyed playing up to the part but it was also fun for the other guests to see these two ‘regular’ women dressed in such a spectacular fashion. These dynamic showgirls certainly added drama, glitz and glamour to the occasion. Mermaid remembers the importance of keeping the costume intact so as not to dim the illusion. She recalls:

With the headdress I kept that on as long as possible. I think as soon as you start taking the things off you start losing the character. You get back to being more normal.

Her comments indicate that although she felt extra-ordinary in her costume she did not feel fundamentally transformed. She knew that by removing headdress the illusion of glamour would diminish and the everyday would begin to creep back. In other words by keeping all the elements of this costume intact Mermaid was actively and consciously maintaining the boundaries of illusion.

I suggest that this example carries several transferable markers for recognizing an outfit as a fancy dress costume. These costumes have elements that categorize fancy dress, such as being in fabrics not generally worn everyday, such as sequins and satins, being figure hugging, being in bright colours, being a character or theme, being imagined by the wearer as being not everyday and dressing with the intent to be looked at and commented on. These showgirl costumes were in place for the context of the Casino Party but out of place for the everyday middle-class lives of the two
wearers. However as with all fancy dress costuming the context of social group and place are vital for a costume to work and be understood. The showgirl costume would be everyday work wear for dancers in a cabaret show or casino and not have the same impact or meaning. Generally for middle-class women in Australia, in public and among friends dress rules are dictated by work and social requirements. Fancy dress is the forum to bend and play with the rules of appearance but it is not a free for all and there are unspoken rules of propriety. Fancy dress is reliant on nuanced acts of boundary crossing and maintenance as well as there being an understanding within the context and cohort of these boundaries. For example if Gypsy and Mermaid had dressed in sequined G-Strings and nipple tassels, as some showgirls do, the line in the context of the Casino Party would have been crossed.

The gorilla conversation

Another way a fancy dress costume affects the interactions between the wearer and the receiver is in the conversations it enables. Most rituals involve specific clothing, a behaviour and speech and fancy dress is no different. Changes in appearance affect behaviour as we have seen above but looking extra-ordinary can also instigate slightly off the wall conversations and role-play. For some people this is all part of playing the game of dress-up make-believe and having fun. Peter Stromberg (2009, 54) argues that in imaginative play:

The role player … sets out to be entertained in, and together with, a social group. Role-playing games … influence the player’s speech, behaviour and feelings in ways that they almost certainly do not plan or intend … The player may be immersed and partially transformed by the game while maintaining an almost flawless footing in the world of the everyday.
Zorro recounts how the game of fancy dress instigated some light-hearted chitchat that would not normally be realised in the everyday:

It’s hard to be serious and have a conversation about the current Sydney house price market to someone who is wearing a gorilla suit or whatever. At a normal party you probably do the usual discussion about what they do for a living or where they live or their family. But at fancy dress party it’s a different conversation; it’s about what they’ve come as, what you’ve come as, where they got the costume or what other people are wearing. Fancy dress does provide a starting point for conversation and can often help break the ice.

Being in fancy dress initiates amusing banter and laughter, which is part of having fun at a themed party. This helps to break the ice because there is an obvious subject - the costume - to talk about, which is useful for people who do not know each other. A fancy dress party is also one of the few times that people can openly admire, critique or lampoon another person’s appearance and get away with it. Indeed it is almost de rigueur to tell the story of one’s own assemblage and comment on the other creations. These interpersonal dialogues acknowledge the effort a person has put into the costume as well as if it is successful or even understood and importantly that it has been noticed. It also confirms that one is part of the frolic of fancy dressers. Zorro’s anecdote illustrates how participants at a fancy dress party simultaneously take on the roles of performer, audience and critic.

Guests at a party are not aware of their shifting positions of performer, audience and critic but move seamlessly ‘betwixt and between’. Throughout the party they change metaphorical hats and become the audience as they watch and are entertained by the other costumed guests and there is pleasure and amusement in this activity. Finally the costumed guests have fun as critics as they cast an eye over the gathered throng and discuss and dispute the wherewithal of the costumes and antics. In my
experiences with Rent-a-Crowd, I have never witnessed overt bitchiness or jealousy over someone else’s costume being bigger, better or flashier – but no doubt this can be part of the bitter-sweet experience of fancy dress in other social groups.

Knowing that a fancy dress party is bounded by time restraints makes the ways to have fun and have a laugh for some people more intense, as in the example of Buzz and the coffin. At other times fun has peaks and troughs during the party depending on who arrives or who is up for some role-play. Fun can even leave the party altogether and just fizzle out perhaps because of the theme, the venue, the mix of people or the music. I have been to low-key fancy dress parties (not Rent-a-Crowd) where the fact that we were in costume faded into the background early on in the piece but they were still pleasant enough evenings. In other words there is no guarantee that just because it is a fancy dress party it is going to be a whopping raucous success and conversely fancy dress fun can be subtle, even cerebral, and still be enjoyable.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how for Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress frolicking is an instigator of fun, risk and sociability that can involve playing with taboos such as sex and death. My study revealed that the pleasures of fancy dress fun are complex, richly nuanced and involve costumes and socialization, amusement and work, anticipation and some role-play. In the context of a fancy dress party, fun is embodied through wearing costumes and individual and communal experiences. This chapter examined the fancy dress journey as a conduit for sociability, fun and play. For some of the
study group there was pleasure and satisfaction before the party in the planning and preparation. Then there was the fun of wearing the costumes at the party where people embodied unusual fabrics, styles and shapes, such as S&M leathers or grotesque body parts and got away with it. Squeezing and encasing or conversely revealing or shrouding the body in a fancy dress costume was a large part of the fancy dress fun as it enabled the wearer to embody a fantasy or vision and bring it to life. It was fun to trick one’s peers with disguises such as wigs or masks and to bend gender stereotypes or be risqué and reveal too much flesh. Then there was the sociability of fancy dress and the delight and fun of seeing others in costumes. For the wearer, the costume gives permission to lark about - although not everyone needed or wanted to do that. In my study the participants did not feel that they have transformed in any significant way into a different persona but were temporarily embodying an idea or concept.

Nonetheless, these transient acts of dressing up do sometime have lasting effects as personal and communal memories, which is an important part of the whole process. A legacy of fancy dress is that although a costume party only lasts a few hours it produces a sense of temporary unity for the participants because they are all dressed-up with somewhere to go. For Rent-a-Crowd not only has their regular participation in fancy dress has helped build and sustain their friendships; it has become a repository of memories, photographs and even costumes. Nurse explains:

We like dressing-up. The majority of people do enjoy it because it’s funny and they get a good laugh out of it you know. It makes you more part of a group; I think it makes you more included in things.

My research has shown that wearing fancy dress creates a lighthearted mood of celebration and escapist fun and is a form of collective silliness that has been part of
the glue that has united these friends into a long-term community. The themes of community and continuity through fancy dress participation will be elaborated in greater depth in the next chapter further examines the link between fancy dress, collective memory and social bonding.
Chapter 3

The Bus Party: The Swinging Seventies was the Best of British

I am not sure whether any of the current guides to English customs throw much light on the indigenous males penchant for outrageous fancy dress… What I’m concerned with is the straight chap’s yen for costumes of death-defying campery. I first found myself trying to explain the concept to overseas visitors on the day of the Royal Wedding. “Why are so many men wearing dresses?” asked a confused Canadian, as a hulking great lad in a flouncy wedding gown strode past. “It’s hard to explain,” I said, “but if you give your average English male the chance to dress as a woman, a vicar or a furry animal, he feels duty-bound to leap at the chance. It’s not so true of Scots, as they get to wear skirts all day long.

Rowan Pelling (2011)

Figure 3: A Knight on the bus.
(Photograph used with permission of participant)
Introduction and aims

Due to their long-term involvement with fancy dress parties Rent-a-Crowd have created a special bond through fancy dress so although the parties themselves are only a few hours duration, the fact there have been many over the years has created an ongoing play-community. Huizenga argues that play and in this case dress-up play brings cohesion in the moment, which can spill over into the everyday and states that “a play community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over” ([1938] 1955, 12). My concept of being ‘out of place in place’, draws on Huizenga’s idea of being “apart together”. I argue that fancy dress draws people together as well as setting the guests apart from the outside and the everyday it creates a sense of “this is for us and not for ‘others’” (Huizenga [1938] 1955, 12).

This chapter builds on these ideas and documents how a particular fancy dress party was a vehicle for building and sustaining communal coherence while providing a platform for individual sartorial flair. I describe and analyze the Rent-a-Crowd Bus Party that celebrated Biker’s sixty-fifth birthday in June 2013. This surprise fancy dress party took place on a doubledecker London bus that travelled through the heart of Sydney. This extraordinary event was an example of how fancy dress can facilitate community cohesion by mobilizing a satirical and sartorial form of British Englishness performed in Australia by Baby Boomer ex-pats. The friends embodied a nostalgic reverie of the halcyon days of their youth as they celebrated the early days of the Rent-a-Crowd pioneers. The party was a huge success and as a result it secured an important place in the ongoing narrative for the current cohort.
The complexities of meaning embedded in the fancy dress Bus Party act as a springboard to explore the concepts of diaspora, nostalgia and heterotopia. My aim is to explore how this fancy dress party was a hedonistic social ritual that not only imbued the guests with a great deal of personal pleasure but coalesced strands of temporality and spatiality of the ‘then and there’ and the ‘here and now’. The ‘then and there’ involved for these members of Rent-a-Crowd, remembering the places, the people, their lives and even their clothes from the 1970s and 80s as they visited their old haunts in Sydney on a London double-decker bus. The ‘here and now’ was being with old and new friends and partners journeying through a *Vivid* and vibrant twenty-first century Sydney. (*Vivid* is a festival of lights and entertainment that runs in Sydney in June). Everyone aboard was definitely older, wrinklier and even wealthier. This party was a joyous and fun way to celebrate the history and continuation of Rent-a-Crowd’s spirit. The travelling bus was a heterotopia. It was a world within a world with multiple meanings both inside and outside of the space. The party was a nostalgic trip down memory lane that acknowledged the British diasporic origins of this group of friends while celebrating the present.

**Roadmap**

The interviewees’ anecdotes of how they partied-on down memory lane and through the busy streets of Sydney on that Saturday night in June will steer this investigation into the complexities embedded in this fancy dress celebration. We will be stopping off to look at how this group from a diaspora used fancy dress and the heterotopian moving place and space of the bus to embody a nostalgic event that celebrated past times and created a new chapter in their collective narrative. Fancy dress costuming was the font from which all other aspects of the party flowed. It was
important for the guests to wear costumes as; it was part of the tradition of the group; it gave a sense of unity; it marked the party as extra special; and it made it more fun and memorable.

The essence of the event was that being in fancy dress alluded to the ideas of ‘‘roots’’ and ‘home’ and the importance of memory in history that then fed into the collective imagination of the group concerned” (Cohen 2008, 13). The costumed participants embodied the layering of time, place and identity and these concepts were overarching themes at this party. There was a sense of both belonging and displacement for the English-born participants, as they would have been aware of being part of two nations while simultaneously being part of Rent-a-Crowd. This fancy dress party represented a lighter side of the concept of diaspora, one that is based on a nostalgic reverie for an idealised ‘home over there’ while being firmly established and settled in the new country.

**Background**

This chapter provides an in-depth study of how Rent-a-Crowd used this Bus Party to concretize a reading of Britishness and celebrate the history and continuity of the group. From the early days of Rent-a-Crowd in the 1970s (as outlined in Chapter One) fancy dress had been a recurring entertainment activity. It was no surprise to have a fancy dress party to celebrate Biker’s sixty-fifth birthday.

Forty years ago Biker had owned a vintage London bus and had travelled around Australia for a couple of years with some of his fellow Rent-a-Crowd cohorts and
occasional fee-paying guests. The bus days and the early years in Sydney are often spoken at social events event today. As Gypsy recalls:

Yes, it draws them together and it’s still talked about over the years you know; it hasn’t been forgotten, has it? It’s something that continues to be brought up in various situations, recalling events and people who weren’t necessarily living here but drift in and out of people’s lives. They return to Australia and you join up with the people who were part of it so I think that’s important too. It’s carried on and it’s certainly created a very strong bond amongst the people, a foundation stone of the Rent-a-Crowd group. The heart of it, the beginnings and it’s carried on I suppose.

This party not only honoured the ‘birthday boy’ but also celebrated the enduring friendships as well as being a commemoration of the fledgling days of Rent-a-Crowd. This event acknowledged the cultural heritage of the founders of the group and was an excellent example of the enthusiasm and sense of fun these friends still bring to their fancy dress escapades.

By holding a Best of British and 1970s themed party, Rent-a-Crowd were tapping into a particular moment in British revivalism that emerged due in part to the Royal Wedding of 2011, the 2012 London Olympics and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee. The guests, being of Anglo-Celtic heritage, understood the symbolism embedded in their costumes, the London bus and the music. By dressing up, the participants embodied a narrative of an iconic era as well as wearing their British heritage on their sleeves.
Organisation and the invitation

The Bus Party was a response to an idea, that from memory I first heard mooted by Buzz at a Rent-a-Crowd dinner. He had seen a double-decker party bus somewhere in Sydney, and thought it would be a great venue for a party for Biker. He perceived that it would be easy to create an event that would be a version of a past, collective reality; there was the need (the birthday), it would be fun, there were the means (the disposable incomes), and there was the ‘crowd’ (Rent-a-Crowd).

The idea for using a London double-decker bus as a venue for Biker’s surprise party was then discussed via communal emails. The response was very positive and people were keen to participate and help in the organization if needed. The Bus Party was a
community-based project from the onset but it also had to be kept secret from Biker.

When the date and time had been arranged Punk and Buzz sent the following communal email invitation.

Dear All,

The plans are now set, not in concrete, but we have a rough idea of what will happen.

**Dress Code – Swinging Seventies or Best of British or On The Buses!**

XXXX and YYYY arrive at [organizer’s address] around 6.15. The bus has been booked to arrive at 6.30 at the meeting place for you lot. The meeting place is Cutler Parade North Ryde, there's a car park adjacent to the Community Aid Centre at 4 Cutler Parade, which is close to the Blenheim Road intersection. This will be good for your parking and have room for the bus. When you’re all aboard, (please be punctual) someone phone our house to see if XXXX has arrived and then come on down.

We are then going to head over towards the East. Although the roads will be busy with the last weekend of Vivid, we can use the bus lanes so it won’t be a problem. After a couple of visits to some old haunts, Moore Park Road, Bondi Beach we are taking the advice of the bus people and heading to Mrs. Macquarie’s Chair for dinner and dancing. It should be easy to park, they have toilets, which are open, no problems with noise, and the view is none too shabby. We need to be back in North Ryde at 10.30 as the bus is costed for four hours only. The good Admiral is loading up his iPod, as there is a dock on board.

**Food & Drinks BYO: Drinks & a plate of food to share.**

We're taking a trestle table, which we can put the food on when we stop and there is also a table on board. The bus has 3 eskies on board for booze. The cost per person, based on everyone who’s said yes, is $35.00 per head. (31 of us to share the cost) This will leave around $10.00 spare, which I'll use to buy ice, plates and plastic glasses. For the food it will be a lot easier for finger food only. There are no food warming facilities so cold treats or lots of foil wrapping for warm food! Would you 'reply all' with what you're bringing so that everyone can see what is already there.

Mum's the word!

P & B

Figure 5: The Invitation.
Let's party like it's 1974

We're 18 again. Whow!
Bride

The Bus Party united the group in nostalgic and patriotic sentiment that was spiced with fun. Punk sums up the reasoning behind the party:

I think it was a nice idea, the double-decker bus. For a few of us, the bus days were the halcyon days before mortgages, kids. The bus was a lot of good times for us and especially for Biker; the bus was a good time in his life. Buzz thought it would be a really good idea to get a bus and have fun like we did.

The party was inspired by a particular era from Rent-a-Crowd’s history that had meaning not only for the birthday ‘boy’ but celebrated the longevity of this group of friends. In the moveable time machine - the bus - they celebrated their community and heritage and showed that the group’s tradition of fancy dress was still alive and well.

It appeared that middle age had not dulled the party spirit. Wearing fancy dress costumes the guests evoked and embodied the nuances of meaning of time and place.

It was a delicious mix of cultures as they partied on a London double-decker bus, while simultaneously travelling through the iconic sections of the city of Sydney. The party bus trip took them past some of their old haunts in Paddington as well as the Harbour Bridge and Mrs. Macquarie’s Chair. Buzz, who was one of the prime organizers of the event, gives a first-hand account of the party:

We parked for dinner in the Domain where the food and a guitar were produced. Biker lost thirty years as he took up the guitar. The dance floor on the bus became the main focus. We returned to North Ryde and partied until the wee hours.
The party transported Rent-a-Crowd firmly into the twenty-first century and brought together many threads and memories while celebrating community sustainability and friendship.

![Image of people dressed in costumes](image)

Figure 6: Biker (in the top hat), with friends and family. (Photograph used with permission of the participants)

**Placing people in time: diaspora, nostalgia and heterotopia.**

In order to explore the nuances of the Bus Party more deeply I am focusing on three concepts – diaspora, nostalgia and Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Through diaspora I explore the concept of belonging and displacement. The concept of nostalgia allows us to look at the ways in which memories can be embodied through dress, time and place. My analysis of the Bus Party made me realise that the here and now and the idea of home and away were entangled and embodied as a real-time event. It is for this reason that I am using the concept of heterotopia, which is
metaphor for a place of contradictions, to analyse the multiple layers of physical and emotional meaning encapsulated in the Bus Party.

**Diaspora**

Historically, the term diaspora was used to describe displaced persons who had been forcibly removed or torn from their homeland due to war or other social or environmental catastrophes. The paradigmatic example was the Jewish diaspora but the term also can apply to migrant groups who have relocated for work, forced or voluntary, trade and business, and even imperial ambition (Brubaker 2005, Cohen 2008). The constituent elements of a diaspora are; dispersion through space or being outside the homeland, homeland orientation in which the group has a real or imagined sense of value, identity and a collective myth to the homeland, boundary maintenance, which is the preservation of a distinct identity through a host society or social network, even though there will be degree of assimilation and hybridization over time (Safran 1991, Brubaker 2006, Cohen 2008). William Safran (1991) influenced contemporary diaspora studies with his article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” in which he outlined the concept as a scientific construct based on the ideas of trauma, exile and nostalgia. What is relevant to my project with Rent-a-Crowd are two of his definitions of a diasporic community. Safran claims:

> They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland - its physical location, history and achievements…They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

What does it means to be part of the English diaspora in Australia today? I argue that fancy dress is an acceptable and fun way to embody and celebrate all things British
and English. I have used Rent-a-Crowd and the Bus Party to examine a refreshed interest in English nostalgia, traditions and community. But how did this group come into being?

The founding commonality of Rent-a-Crowd was being English and young in Australia in the 1970s. The group haphazardly evolved, as a network for English travellers and workers who were new to Sydney and introduction was through friends, friends of friends or sometimes relatives. These young adults had a sense of adventure that took them travelling the world and were not forcibly removed from their homeland nor were they escaping economic hardship, persecution or war. They had the luxury of being able to return to Britain if things did not work out here and there were people from the fledgling group who did choose to return. Today there are still many in the group who have the means to travel back and forth between the two homelands both for pleasure and to visit family, as indeed I do myself.

Rent-a Crowd and its sociability are an example of what Cohen (2008) terms ‘a diasporic consciousness’:

A diasporic consciousness has … moreover, to be mobilized (that is, socially constructed). A significant number of social actors need to accept their collective self-definition as a transnational community, organize to spread this perception and persuade others to participate in actions designed to cement their diasporic character and status. (Cohen 2008, 13)

Rent-a-Crowd are part of the English diaspora in Australia and although a nebulous group are an embodiment of the above views. They self-identify as being both English and Australian but there can be for some of them conflict when it comes to
who to support in for example the Ashes Cricket Test, which is between England and Australia. This network of friends has built and sustained their community through the organization and lively participation in a variety of social activities including fancy dress. The Bus Party was an opportunity to cement their diasporic character and status and to put these beliefs and ideas into practice. The Best of British theme for the party was successful because this group of Baby Boomers shared personal or vicarious knowledge of British and English culture and iconography.

The party was an example of what Brubaker believes is the modern concept and experience of diaspora, which can be used to describe migrant groups who maintain, to various degrees, emotional, social and even political ties to a homeland. Diaspora has now come to be used in reference not exclusively to a bounded entity or group but as “an idiom, stance or claim” (Brubaker 2006, 26) as well as a category of practice and project. Diasporic practice can include maintaining cultural ways of dress, language and celebrations. Diasporic idiom is maintaining the belief system or attitudes from a homeland and diasporic claim is the acknowledgement of ethnic heritage. Rent-a-Crowd is a diasporic community because it has a toe in two camps; it is inclusive and exclusive and it is English and it is Australian. Admittedly the core of the group hail from England and are bound by their British heritage but it is also inclusive in so much as it has over the years and currently includes people from Australia, America, South Africa, Canada and New Zealand. The group could be viewed as a reflection of the fluidity of contemporary Australian society.
Within such a richly multicultural society, the place of Englishness is uncertain. Is there a place for the English diaspora in general to be acknowledged and celebrated in Australia? Although modern Australia had its origins as a British colony, English migrants have not always been included in any studies on diaspora. Are there elements of cultural cringe, shame or discrimination to admit to being a ‘Pom’? There are some contexts where the term British and English are interchangeable such as in the forum of international relations but on the domestic front the divisions between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are vigorously differentiated. For example at the Commonwealth Games, England, Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland all compete as separate nations whereas at the Olympic Games, Great Britain competes as a united entity.

In response to a general lack of historic representations of English identity amongst settler groups, a three year study of the English in America is being undertaken at Northumbria University in the United Kingdom, *Locating the Hidden Diaspora: The English in North America in Transatlantic Perspective, 1769-1950*. According to the group’s research there is now resurgence for a redefinition and rediscovery of what it means to be English or of English extraction in America. While this study is concerned with America I suggest that the circumstances are similar here in Australia and that Englishness as an ethnicity has also been overlooked and undervalued here too. Tania Buelmann from The English Diaspora Study group explains why:

> English ethnicity is largely perceived as a passive or invisible entity, and because England provided the civic and political institutions that societies abroad modified and that every other immigrant ethnicity was defined against, Englishness itself has been virtually forced from view. (2012, 5)
This invisibility was double-edged because the English felt they were the benchmark for normalcy and for a while lost touch with their rich history and folk traditions. It was assumed that because of the scope, power and influence of the British Empire and industrialization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that English identity was subsumed into pride for the Empire. Although part of the United Kingdom, the Scots, Irish and Welsh tended to be marginalized and clung to their ethnic identities through their music, dance and cultural practices to compensate for the dominant role of the English. Even today there is a tendency to mistakenly assume that there are no discerning qualities to the English:

The fact is that the English have always been reluctant to provide their own definition of Englishness. For a long time, the question was hardly of any relevance at all: there was no difference between Britishness and Englishness…which does not mean that Englishness did not exist as a cultural phenomenon but simply that it had no political existence and, to a large extent, still lacks political representation. Over the course of the twentieth-century, however, Britishness has been dealt several weakening blows. The most violent was the end of the Empire, together with deindustrialization and now, devolution, the revival of nationalism in Scotland (and to a lesser extent in Wales), together with the European Union and immigration also threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom. (Reviron-Piegay 2009, 2-3)

Bueltmann (2012) believes that England is suffering from a crisis in confidence and “drifts, almost self consciously between tub-thumbing populism and teary-eyed public spectacle ”(4). The countermovement of this is the trend of English ethnicity being rediscovered. There are varying perspectives at play in this revival of Englishness. There is the classic view of the national identity based on the rural idyll of “‘Deep England’ as a ‘green and pleasant land’ populated by historical figures…[that] builds upon a racialised discourse of national and imperial superiority” (Wright 1985 cited Byrne 2007, 527). This mantle has been taken as the rallying cry for the English nationalist movement as well as their re-signifying of the English flag, the red and white St George’s Cross. However, contemporary England is multi-racial and
according Byrne what it means to be English needs “to be re-imagined … in relation to changing social and political context” (2007, 526).

There are positive avenues that incorporate a sense of nationhood such as renewed interest in folk traditions in music and dance. The London Olympics of 2012 renewed interest and pride in sport. The popular television costume drama Downton Abbey is hugely popular but does perpetuate a traditional view of England as class-bound and mono-cultural. On a personal note I embrace my English heritage by being in an all-female Morris-dancing group in Sydney. Yet this group is a modern re-appropriation of a tradition as Morris Dancing is traditionally all male. Another example of interest in British and English culture here in Australia are the pay television channels that show only British content, which indicates there is interest and demand in the viewing public in this country.

By holding a Best of British and 70s themed party, Rent-a-Crowd were tapping into this ‘deep England’ mood of English nostalgic revivalism that is present in contemporary Australia. A central mechanism for this was the wearing of fancy dress that allowed the telling and showing of a narrative of a particular manifestation of iconic eras and English heritage. The varied (and literal) threads, expressions and symbols of era and nationality linked the fancy dress participants together within a shared, communal intentional event. They were saying we’re English, we’re Baby Boomers, we’re loud and we’re proud and we’re here to stay in Australia. The party was a manifestation of diasporic practice as it was an outlet to display and engage in
stereotypically English and British ways of behaviour by having fun dressing up, which is a very English pastime as the quoted at the beginning of the chapter shows.

**Nostalgia**

Nostalgia is about remembering a soft focused version of ‘ago and far away’ and for some there is a real yearning to relive those times and places because they were perceived to be an idyll, even if there were hardships. Nostalgia is often understood as a melancholic longing for the past that is “founded on the unattainable distance between the past and the present … a hopeless longing for something lost and irrecoverable” (Higson 2014, 210). However, Svetlana Boym in her essay “Nostalgia and Its Discontents” (2007) coined the term “reflective nostalgia” to describe a form of nostalgia that is not bound into a rigid or wistful understanding of the past and can in fact be humorous and exaggerated. This type of nostalgia is not about historical accuracy but incorporates sharing playful and happy memories of an idealized past:

Nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams… The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (Boym 2007, 8)

Boym captures the essence and reasoning of the blueprint for the Bus Party with the above interpretation of nostalgia. The concept of the Bus Party was about recapturing moments from a youthful past and a reverie of a distant homeland For Rent-a-Crowd, this party was based on the collective mythologies of the travels on the London bus in Australia that some of the group were involved in the 1970s. They all knew that this
party was firmly situated in the present and no one was fooled into believing they had really stepped back in time, but as Gypsy recalls using the ‘lingo’ of the era:

It was very fab. I think everybody got into the swing of it. Swinging London - which was fantastic. There was some part of that era that people latched onto - made it part of the night, and everyone had gone to so much effort I think. Everybody looked fabulous and the bus made it seem like we were stepping back in time. It was great.

However, the party also created a new special event or chapter that incorporated the current configuration of the friendship group. This party linked the temporality of the nostalgia for the past fun times with celebrating ethnicity and friendships while also creating a story to be told in the future. As Boym points out nostalgia “is not always retrospective but can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past determined the needs of the present, have a direct impact on … the future” (2007, 8).

The participants used fancy dress costuming to embody and experience a tongue in cheek version of the halcyon times of the 1970s. According to Harkin and Huber, it would appear that Baby Boomers are in denial about getting older and try to buy back the time of their youth:

What distinguishes the baby boomers is that they are determined to really have their time again – and are prepared to pay for the privilege…middle-aged baby boomers return to pursuits and products familiar from their youth – ‘down-ageing’. (Harkin and Huber 2004, 37)

Rent-a-Crowd are no exception to the above findings and the Bus Party used a mix of dress and music help to create the illusion of being transported back in time.
Music, dress and nostalgia

Where would a party be without music and disco music was an essential element that made the Bus Party go with a swing? Sociologist Arno Van der Hoeven looks at the connection between nostalgia and the pop music his article “Remembering the Popular Music of the 1990s”. His findings, which were based on in-depth interviews with flashback dance party audiences in the Netherlands, investigates themed partying, popular music, and dressing-up in the quest for nostalgic experiences:

For older audiences, attending 1990s parties is a way of engaging with their own biographical experiences; they see the events as taking them back to a time when they had fewer responsibilities... The parties make those in attendance aware of their former selves, particular periods in their lives and the ways in which their current identities are rooted in these pasts. (Van der Hoeven 2014, sec. 5.3)

Van der Hoeven observed that the dance parties were a way for adults to enjoy an embodied pastiche of the nostalgic past. The role of clothing and dance styles from the era, in his study case the 1990s, functioned as a framework through which recollections of the decade were negotiated and helped the participants to rekindle earlier identities Through costuming and music, place and time, the Bus Party enabled my study group to also “cherish their mediated memories as formative parts of their autobiographical and cultural identities” (Van Dijck cited Van de Hoeven 2014, sec. 5.3).

Being in fancy dress costume enabled the revelers to access memories because according to Robyn Gibson in The Memory of Clothes (2015, xv):
Clothes are layered with meaning since they have the power to act as memory prompts. Woven into their fabric are traces of past experiences. Stitched into their seams are links to people we have loved and lost …There is however the unreliability of memories as in order to draw on them we return to the past which is often an amalgam of both fact and fiction.

The physicality of wearing, feeling and moving in a costume plus imagination and a sense of ridiculousness, makes fancy dress parties attractive and fun. Fancy dress costuming is one way that people can embody the whimsy of nostalgia without trying to create a genuine representation of people, place or times past. The 1960s and 70s are popular themes for Baby Boomer costume parties because it was the era of their youth. Today there are many online sites and high street retailers who supply a dizzying array of ready-made costumes from this period. However, some people prefer to source their costumes from their own wardrobe. Punk recalls the provenance of the original 1970s gold satint flared trousers she wore to the Bus Party:

I bought these gold pants with nine weeks worth of wages back in the Seventies when I was fifteen and because they cost so much I didn’t throw them out and I’m wearing them now.

This particular item of clothing has a history that ties Punk back to her teenage years and they were important enough for her to keep safe and in good condition all these years. The gold satin pants are visceral and one can imagine the sensation of wearing them and how they would make one feel. Punk felt ‘pretty good’ wearing them to the Bus Party because it meant she had retained her youthful figure and not succumbed to middle-age spread. The satin pants were seeped in nostalgia and linked the ‘then and there’ with the ‘here and now’ in the direct material physicality of sensory reminiscing. Her experience shows how everyday dress can morph into fancy dress due to circumstance and imagination and time.
In preparation for the Bus Party some of the guests went on a mini-group outing to organise their hire costumes. As we saw in Chapter Two, preparation can be a fun prologue to the party itself:

Gypsy - We went to the Wardrobe at Chatswood. Mermaid, Diva and I had a good long session in there, trying on several outfits, beads and peace signs and you know. I think that was part of it too … the whole build up. Going and choosing your costume and having a good giggle over what we used to wear - the platform shoes etc. There’s such a big selection it’s hard to decide at times. Do you go for the midriff or the mini-skirt? I was just keen to wear a wig that night and I think that’s all part of the persona.

These participants were striving to capture a fantasy representation of their youth with their costumes. By playing dress-up and making costume choices in the shop, the friends were able to create and practice the fantasy personas they would display at the party. This preparation laid the foundations and built anticipation for their enjoyment of the party.

Being comfortably off the individuals in the group were able to exploit the consumer opportunities available to them through the commercial party and retail fancy dress industries and make their vision of the past into a partying present for the here and now. Nostalgia, forever blurry, is now the ultimate upcycling project:

Nostalgia is not a singular phenomenon; it is multi-layered, diversely experienced and variously exploited … But for post-modern nostalgics, the irrecoverable is now attainable, the difference between past and present flattened out. This is partly because post-modern nostalgia re-cycles images, objects and styles associated with the relatively recent past. (Higson 2014, p.120, p.142)

The Bus Party was an example of how easily a nostalgic version of the past can be made attainable by being bought and brought into the present by using the symbols of specific places and the past. The logistics of this party such as hiring the bus,
preparing costumes, organising the food and the music and the invitations used readily available resources and modern technologies in order bring a reimagined past to life. For Rent-a-Crowd there was no discernable hardship, saving for or scrimping involved in preparing for the party and the guests were happy to become commercial consumers of nostalgia. The partygoers recycled an approximation of their idealized past and embodied it through their costuming and behaving in the carefree manner they imagined they would have done in their younger days.

**Heterotopia**

Heterotopia is a complex present of multiple meanings that can be also be a place for nostalgia to flourish. But what is a heterotopia? Heterotopia is Latin for a place of ‘otherness’ is a term according to Hetherington (1997, 42) that came from the study of anatomy. It was the term used for parts of the body that were alien such as growths or parts that were extra, missing or out of place. It has now come to be used a metaphor for duality and contradictions. The French philosopher Michel Foucault developed the concept of heterotopia to describe a physical and mental place of otherness. In his paper “Of Other Places: Heterotopia” (1967) he posits that real spaces are assigned different meanings based on the relations between the inner and the outer, the internal and the external and the understanding of time. Foucault argued that:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of openings and closing, that both isolates them and makes them penetrable … the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. (1967, 46-49)
In essence it is a particular place and/or space that layers meaning by blending reality and unreality into relationships with other times and places. There is always a point of entry and exit to a heterotopia, which implies exclusivity of belonging and invitation by virtue of being other, and that one crosses a threshold that changes one’s perception. Foucault believed that sites of heterotopia depend on a system of opening and closing and could be places of perfect social control such as prisons, museums, libraries and new colonies or conversely places of transgression such as festivals and carnival. Heterotopia creates an imaginary world in real-time that can be seen as space of illusion, such as the Bus Party. This fancy dress party combined layers of 1) space as the bus moved through 2) place, the city 3) time as the real-time of the event and nostalgia for times past 4) boundaries of belonging were indicated and shown by being part of the invited group and 5) identities created by fancy dress were purposely playful and temporary.

Foucault presented the notion of heterotopia as a suggestive analysis of particular social and cultural spaces. His concepts are relevant to my project as they help contextualize the layers of meaning that are present in the transgressive and topsyturvy nature of the physical and social arena of fancy dress. My data suggests that a fancy dress party is a heterotopia because it is a real-time activity that has points of entry and exit, it is a mirror as well as a distortion of the everyday, it is temporary and people are not what they seem because they are wearing extra-ordinary costumes. This experiential richness of elements makes the lens of heterotopia helpful in exploring the interplay of the layers of meaning that are embedded in fancy dress.
The London bus on which Rent-a-Crowd partied that night was the repository of multiple layers of meaning, which is why it can be viewed as a site of heterotopia. The space of the bus carried particular meanings of time, country, community and fun while the environs of Sydney and the sites visited carried meanings being simultaneously the antipodes and home and linked some of the group to their early days in Australia. The interior of the bus was a moving disco decked out with party lights, London transport posters and signage. It was pulsating with the sounds of pop music and the guests were festooned in fantastical and whimsical garb reflecting the 70s or British icons. From the outside, this vintage red London bus was instantly recognizable as a British icon, which is renowned throughout the world, so there was a dash of incongruity to see one on the streets of Sydney.

This London bus had become manifestation of a heterotopia because it required particular entry and exit points, it was invitation only so one was other by virtue of being there and it was set apart from the everyday. It was a real-time space that shaped and was shaped by the expectations and activities of the partying guests.

The Bus Party can also be attributed the function of “bringing foreign places together in a temporary whole” (Foucault 1967, 46-49). The physical internal space of the bus and the places outside visited while touring through old haunts in Sydney that were significant to the early Rent-a-Crowd days, brought together sites that were embedded with stages and aspects of the lives of the group that mirrored, distorted, unsettled and inverted (Johnson 2012) meanings of time and place. There was a tension between internal space, external place and temporality as the participants revealed in the present
while remembering the past - but all in the name of fun celebration. The participants were able to immerse themselves in the illusionary aspects of the occasion because they had adhered to the prescribed dress code of fancy dress.

The space inside and the places outside of the bus as it travelled through Sydney on that June night in 2013 happily married the essence of the modern city with a physical and emotional trip down memory lane. The party showed how fluid, layered and blurred are the meaning of time, place and memory. This occurred because the London bus served as a catalyst that triggered the memories of the early days of Rent-a-Crowd which is regarded as a carefree time. However the fancy dress Bus Party was not tinged with nostalgic regret but it was entered into in the spirit of fun, community and entertainment. The whole event was pro-active, conceived and controlled by the group for amusement and celebration.

Inside the bus everyone was crammed together; there was the noise of chatter and music and laughter. The dimensions of the bus restricted the space but that immediacy helped to create the fun atmosphere. Upstairs some of the guests negotiated the fixed seating and were sitting in tight little groups while they drank and chatted excitedly in a frenzy of costumed revelry. As Gypsy recalls:

The drink was flowing and the music. Admiral had put together music of that era so that was good. Uhuru had made this fabulous bus cake, so that was really wonderful. Biker got his guitar out so that was a trip down memory lane.

Downstairs some dancing queens danced their socks off to the driving beats of disco classics and were rocked and rolled as the bus trundled through the Sydney streets. Outside the bus the psychedelic light displays of the Vivid Festival lit up Sydney
Harbour, which added to the fantastical ambience of the night. Gypsy describes the world within a world on the bus and how the inside and outside worlds contributed to ambience of their festivities:

We had perfect night weather wise. We got stuck on the bridge, Vivid was on so we had a fair length of time just sitting but that gave people time to just enjoy the night. I mean it added something, as it was a bit psychedelic, a bit 70s and that was really wonderful.

Threads of music, sounds and sights of the city, people crammed into a travelling time machine, jollity and outlandish garb were all elements of this heterotopia. The nostalgic bus trips from the late 1970s were encased in the real bus of 2013 and both merged to create a new extra-ordinary place of myth at this party. The stories of the original bus trips are now over forty years old and are part of the collective memory of this community. These stories are often re-told and people are familiar with them even if they were not part of Rent-a-Crowd at the time. This familiarity with these folk-tales helped the present configuration of friends enjoy the Bus Party but the party was also about being present in the present. But other elements link these friends together such being from Britain and being Baby Boomers and being part of a supportive social network. For the duration of the Bus Party, these reveling reprobates were also embracing the inevitability of the future, cocooned for the present in an iconic London bus.

**Conclusion**

The Bus Party was an example of what Huizinga ([1938] 1955) referred to as the durable and communal effects of play. Although the party itself lasted only few hours it was an arena where people were able to develop their interpersonal
relationships and build a sense of ongoing community. My interpretation of how this was achieved drew on the concepts of diaspora, nostalgia and heterotopia and showed how they can be embodied as a lived experience in a shared celebratory space. Firstly the commonality of wearing British inspired fancy dress was an opportunity for some of these individuals to outwardly acknowledge that they are part of English diaspora through various levels of sartorial commitment and styling. Secondly the Bus Party was a social and cultural activity that embodied nostalgia because it was a conduit for individuals and the group to oscillate between former and current identities and display memory and personal narratives embodied in fancy dress. Thirdly the party could be viewed as a version of Foucault’s interpretation of heterotopia, because it was a site of otherness imbued with layers of illusion. The physical bus had dual functionality: inside it was a space where current and former identities were brought together through fancy dress costuming, while outside the bus traversed through the present while visiting some of Rent-a-Crowd’s old haunts.

For the duration of the Bus Party, the clothes, the double-decker London bus, the sociability, the places visited and the music coalesced to aid in memory retrieval and nostalgic reverie. However this party was so much more than homage to the halcyon days; as Viking said it was a heartwarming and fun way to celebrate with friends surviving of the slings and arrows of everyday life. The partying guests were encapsulated in a “closed phenomenal world” (Handelman 1990, 16.3) that was symbolic of something outside of themselves while simultaneously being of their own design and logic. There was the reality of their physical presence on the bus in the ‘here and now’ coupled with the reverie of the ‘then and there’ of youth and English roots. This heterotopia or potpourri of time, place, space and shifting realities turned
the “nowhere of the imagination into a good place” (St John 1999, 23) that was embodied by the assembled partygoers as a way of celebrating their community.
Chapter 4

Fabulous Finale

Re-dressing fancy dress

Fancy dress may be regarded as a fantastic and outrageous nonsense, but it has a long history as a popular social pastime and form of celebration that has evolved from diverse and international rituals and traditions. This thesis placed fancy dress in a historical and cultural context and examined fancy dress through an interdisciplinary lens. It also investigated fancy dress as a hyperreal form of everyday dress and analyzed the elements that make a fancy dress costume such as materials, styling, themes and design. I posit that fancy dress is an important part of the ongoing debate within society on dress, fashion and appearance. It is hoped that this study may be the beginning of an ongoing study into fancy dress in the wider community. Avenues of enquiry could include investigation into the business models and commercialization of fancy dress, gender construction and role-play, the symbolism of costumes and the place of fancy dress as a contemporary cultural practice among other groups.

By documenting the fancy dress experiences and practices of a group of friends, who self-identify as Rent-a-Crowd my study explored the role of fancy dress as a conduit for socialization, celebration and amusement. The project discussed how this group has used many years of fancy dress and fancy dress parties as a social practice and leisure activity that has helped to build and sustain relationships. One of the outcomes of the project is that it was an opportunity for the interviewees to revisit their fancy dress stories and memorabilia and has provided a unique archive for Rent-a-Crowd. It
has shown that the group still keenly practices fancy dress, and provides a case study of contemporary fancy dress lived experiences in Australia.

**Conclusion**

This study revealed that fancy dress is an embodied social practice and experience. Fancy dress parties are popular because they are a good way of bringing groups of people together. The reason fancy dress works is precisely because people are all dressed in ‘silly’ costumes which often has the effect of making the participants feel more affable, relaxed and willing to ‘break the ice’ and talk to people they may not know.

The data from the study group, Rent-a-Crowd, revealed that fancy dress parties and dress-up play included a complex array of feelings, experiences and outcomes. Firstly this group organised and participated in fancy dress events in order to have fun and a laugh with friends and to celebrate a special occasions. They are after creating an “exceptional situation” (Huizinga [1938] 1955, 12) at the fancy dress party. Secondly fancy dress is a non-work leisure activity that has evolved into a type of common hobby or pastime for the group. Thirdly, fancy dress is a short-term activity, which can have long-term effects, “beyond the duration of the individual game” (Huizinga [1938] 1955, 12). In the case of Rent-a-Crowd, this involves creating and/or sustaining friendships and creating stories [histories] to be shared and remembered.
My research suggests that the act of wearing fancy dress creates a temporary community and environment where the opportunity exists for everyone is having fun and able to ‘have a laugh’. On the surface fancy dress is a series of what Huizinga termed exceptional moments of play, as they are short lived and transient but memorable and often fun and help to create the play space. Having fun with fancy dress is dependent, for example on the personalities of the participants, the degree of their involvement, the venue and the party theme. There are many variables in a fancy dress experience and this case study found no benchmark by which to gauge what is the ultimate fancy dress experience.

Fancy dress can be broken down into constituent parts: type of event and theme, costume preparation and creativity, performance and identity, community and shared memories. In this thesis the term ‘fancy dress’ was used to refer to both the costume and the event. Fancy dress brings together elements of the material costume, the imagination of the wearer, the perception of the viewer and the context of the event. The story the wearer imagines they’re telling with their outfit is of equal importance in shaping the fancy dress experience as the materiality of the outfit. Identities, whilst playful, are not governed by a distinct set of rules as are rituals; for example there is no master of ceremonies in the same way as in a ritual, no prescribed words or actions to perform in order to give meaning to the occasion or to the clothing. While fancy dress does share some of the qualities of ritual, such as specific clothing, performativity, requiring the presence of others and is temporal, it is not transformative in the sense of ritual. This current ethnographic research shows that fancy dress participants do not permanently change their status or have epiphany experiences.
Fancy dress is about transient, surface appearances that do not usually have a lasting effect on its participants (both wearer and viewer). However, my findings suggested that for the study group fancy dress was a form of play that was an example of Huizinga’s concept of durable effects of play. In other words, for Rent-a-Crowd, many years of fancy dress has worked on longer-term timeframes by contributing to building and sustaining deeper bonds between participants. It has become a social and cultural practice that is regularly used for celebrating birthdays and other significant events. The legacy of the fancy dress costuming and parties for Rent-a-Crowd is that is has become a shared archive and a repository of memories for the group and for individuals.

Fancy dress: the final curtain?

I posit that social cohesion is an important reason why people practice fancy dress, but as Hippy observes there are other reasons and functions of fancy dress for Rent-a-Crowd. She argues that:

‘Cos we’re all sick of each other we want to see each other in a slightly different light, to make it more fun I guess. Mostly it’s the absolute hilarious fun of seeing what everyone’s got on. Sometimes feelings of jealousy that they’ve got better costumes than you have and may be you wish that you had bothered more.

This perhaps alludes to the mundane aspects which can be part of long term friendships and dress-up play brings a note of the unexpected to special events. Jealousy and good-humoured competitiveness can be constructive factors and encourage creative costuming. The Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress parties are
carnivalesque because they deliberately prick the bubble of straight-laced middle-class seriousness and respectability “…by infiltrating the comedic, the ludic and the erotic into otherwise controlled and ‘respectable’ modes of social and cultural expression” (Keenan 1999, 395). Even so, fancy dress has been a common denominator and shared interest for this diverse group of people with a variety of backgrounds, careers and aspirations. It is the amusing glue that helps ‘friends who play together, stay together’. The Rent-a-Crowd costume parties are an affirmation of belonging to the group and feeling confident enough with each other to be foolish or silly, predictable or outlandish.

The latest Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress party was in June 2015 to celebrate a sixtieth birthday and it was no surprise the theme was the 1960s. The guests came from many areas of the host’s life but the majority were her Rent-a-Crowd friends and it was the Rent-a-Crowd guests who partied till two in the morning. The tradition of fancy dress, as this thesis has begun to document and analysis, therefore continues.

Finally, on a personal note, I would like to conclude this chapter by saying that the participants and I had fun doing the interviews. At every session, be it with a couple or an individual, we were embodying the lasting effects of fancy dress fun by being together while sharing and listening to stories and looking photographs. Without exception, everyone was very generous with their time and the anecdotes flowed freely. There was much mirth during the interviews suggesting that fancy dress fun can be re-played in the telling and remembering. Does the fun never stop? The participants’ narratives support my hypothesis that fancy dress is a pivotal, enjoyable
and fun social activity for Rent-a-Crowd that has helped build and sustain the group over many years. I will let Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress participant Gypsy have the last word:

Yes, it’s been great fun to sit down and have a chat about fancy dress and recall all the fabulous parties that we’ve had over the years. More to come, definitely more to come I’m sure.

Figure 7: Rent-a-Crowd ready to party on into the future.

(Photograph used with permission of participants)
Appendix 1

Twenty years of fancy dress parties

The following is a selection of Rent-a-Crowd fancy dress parties from the past twenty years. I have also included a few other fancy dress events that I have attended that were not Rent-a-Crowd to show that other social groups I mix with also participate in fancy dress.


- Vivre La France. 1997. Cleopatra’s birthday in Terrigal, NSW.


Dressed to Kill. 2003. Uhuru and Wizard’s combined 152 years old birthday party in Chatswood, NSW.


The Best of British. 2012. Singer’s 60th birthday at Ryde Eastwood Leagues Club.


The Swinging Sixties. 2015 Batgirl’s 60th birthday in a private residence, Sydney.
Other fancy dress events I have attended (2010 – 2015)

- Halloween birthday party. 2010. At a private residence in Avalon.


- NSW History Society Masked Arts Ball 2013, to celebrate History Week. David Jones Ballroom, Sydney.

- Hippest Hippies. 2014/2015. New Years Eve fancy dress party. At a private residence, Rozelle, NSW.

- Heroes and Villains. 2015. 21st Birthday party at a private residence in Toronto, NSW.
Appendix 2

Notes from a Rock’n’roll Fancy Dress party (2010)

The 1950s Rock’n’roll party held at our house in September 2010 was to celebrate my husband’s birthday. To evoke the era we had hired a piano player, who played the music of Jerry Lee Lewis. We had home delivered pizza and decorated with spotty balloons and garish plastic tableware. All the guests had morphed into 50s caricatures and among the guests there were two Elvis’s, a Roy Orbison, several bobby soxers, Marilyn Monroe, a Teddy boy replete with leather jacket, a duck’s ass coif and plenty of attitude. My home was functioning differently too, as a temporary pizza parlour, dance hall and speakeasy. The clothes were the main instigators of these changes and enabled the partygoers to play dress-up and have fun in a publicly social and acceptable way. The whole evening was great fun.

My experience

I decided to wear a glamorous ‘New Look’ outfit with a full skirt, multi layered petticoats and teeter around on silly shoes. All things I do not do wear the course of my everyday life. I wanted to be ‘fab and glam’. This was after all a dress-up party, so why not be over the top. As the hostess I needed to embrace the spirit of the 50s theme through my appearance but I also had to be comfortable enough to organise the party and mingle with friends. My dress, from Vinnie’s, had a scoop neck, three-quarter fitted sleeves in black jersey and a full skirt in a peacock and gold coloured print. I wore two full net petticoats, which I had hired from the local costume hire shop, high heels, a black belt, gold hooped earrings and lashings of make up, but could not figure out how to apply the false eye lashes I had bought. I was transformed for the night and was aware that the clothes made me move elegantly. This was partly because the skirt took up a lot of room and swooshed as I sashayed in my heels, but my sense of self was altered by the whole package of dress, expectation and occasion. My costume had transported me to an ‘other’ place and transformed me into an ‘other’ self for the duration of the party.

James Laver in Taste and Fashion in 1937 (Ambrose 2007, Corrigan 2008) devised Laver’s Law to determine people’s reaction to changes in fashion over time. His chart puts into words how we intuitively respond to time and the fashion cycle. It is
relevant to Fancy Dress studies because clothes from different eras are a stalwart of dressing-up and clothes from the past can be seen as hideous, ridiculous, romantic etc. depending how long ago those styles were popular. For example, fashion one year out of date is considered dowdy; a fashion one year ahead of its time is considered outré and so on. The further back in time the fashion styles the more kudos it has, but clothes from a generations’ childhood or youth is often seen as hideous, ridiculous or quaint. Our 1950s party was, for most of us present, the era of our childhoods and youth, so we associated the clothes of the era, according to Laver’s Law as amusing and quaint.

Fashion cycle: time and taste and mode of fancy dress

Romantic party: Jane Austen 100 years ago (remember the book was written in the 1930’s)

Ridiculous party: ABBA glam rock from 20 years ago

Hideous party: Punk10 years ago

Amusing party: rock’n’roll 30 years ago

For Baby Boomers 50s, 60s, 70s parties are popular because costumes can be adapted from their own clothes. They may have original clothes from the era and vintage clothes can be found in second hand shops.

1950s clothes

The styles of 1950s clothes had been socially constructed to signify the feminine and emphasize the female form and restrict it at the same time. These styles are impractical and restrict movement yet women today hanker after the romance of petticoats, stockings and corsets. I did feel ‘girly’ in my frock- an archaic term, but one that in itself conjures up the styles of an era where women led quite restricted lives and the idea of glamour involved yards of material. The exuberance of Dior’s New Look [ref] was a response to the austere fashions of the Utility designs of the Second World War. It was also a reactionary mode of dress as it did restrict women, who had been doing manual and ‘men’s’ work during the war. By putting women back in large cumbersome dresses and corsets, stripped them of the independence they had had when they worked in the factories, in the forces or as farmers. In the post war years, women were tied back to the kitchen and domesticity.
All this was being expressed in the outfit I was wearing.

There was nothing inherently nostalgic in my costume, but I had given it that meaning through association the occasion of our 50s Rock’n’roll party. A fancy dress party is an occasion to try to recreate, through dress, some of the essence of a past/future era or a fantasy world. By putting on a facsimile of dress worn in a previous era, one may get a taste of what is would have been like to live then even though we wear them for entertainment. Our pastiche 1950s costumes could be seen as a way to connect with our ancestors and iconic film or music stars.
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