

Playing with inequality:

**An ethnographic study examining the ambiguities
of young children's death and violence play**

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Abstract

Young children's imaginative play about death and violence is contentious and under-theorised, often approached in normative terms where the play represents the source of or solution for wider 'social problems'. In contrast, this study offers insights into the complex and shifting social ecology of death/violence play in one London-based nursery and clarifies the processes through which inequitable sociospatial relations are renewed, reworked, and even transformed in such activity.

Utilising a critical ethnographic approach informed by critical realism and the social studies of childhood, the study engaged with children's and adult educators' perspectives and practices over a period of 1½ years through semi-participant observation, interviews, and multivocal video revisiting.

The initial data chapters offer an analytic description of the setting, arguing that contradictory discursive, institutional, and material relations serve to render children's death/violence play as 'matter out of place', paradoxically considered partially recuperable in relation to (boys') development. The subsequent data chapters, informed by materialist feminist perspectives, point to the way imaginary characters became mobile resources for some children whilst inequalities serve to inscribe characters, including the monstrous, on others. The chapters point to the identifications players made with characters and narratives through a process of intense dialogic embodiment, in the process renewing sociospatial relations linked to normative heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, propertied relations, and flexible selves.

This thesis, however, contends that ludic activity offers possibilities for overturning the status quo and enacting new social imaginaries. In the study setting, the death trope served as a generative metaphor to provoke caring touch, opening up social relations beyond economic calculation and gendered and generationed aspects of care. Play, it is argued, is a site of struggle, one that can offer a space of ethical-political engagement and radical potential, with implications for pedagogical projects concerned with equality and social transformation.

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CHAPTER 1:

Opening narrative

A collective gasp issued from the group of children. Some shouted: 'You can't have a gun!' and 'Someone will get hurt! Or die!' Michael, the child who had 'introduced' the gun to the collaborative story being told by the group of children in my preschool class (a story which to that point had been filled with butterflies and daisies), argued back: 'But it's not real!'

The argument which ensued took over the rest of that day's group time and spilled out into debates between my colleagues, families, and the children: Should pretend weapons be allowed in imaginative play and story-telling at the preschool? How were we as a community to respond to narratives involving violence and death? The debates continued over a number of weeks in a multitude of formal and informal venues.

One afternoon when children were being picked up from the setting a loud argument broke out between one group of parents who believed that imaginative play about death and violence would turn children into violent adults and another group of parents who had a more permissive approach to gun play, drawing on their experience as police officers (who are armed in Canada) and in hunting practices in rural and Indigenous communities. On another day, a group of children agonised over the ethics of using water guns on a hot summer day if we were to conclude as a setting that gun play was problematic. As educators, we felt uncertain how to respond to the growing antagonisms in the preschool community, let alone how we ourselves felt about such play.

Eventually, despite or perhaps because no resolutions had been reached, the discussion dissipated. Yet, I (and possibly others) have continued to reflect upon it.

1.1 Children's death/violence play in policy, practice, and academic literature

In many ways, the moment where 'gun met butterflies' was the point of genesis for this thesis, an ethnographic study into imaginative play about themes of death and violence at Westside Nursery in London, UK. In the midst of negotiating heated deliberations – provoked when 'gun met butterflies' – at the preschool in Burnaby, Canada, where I had worked for seven years, I began looking at the professional and academic literature on children's imaginative play involving themes of death and physical violence (hereafter referred to as death/violence play). Three things struck me immediately. First, multiple play themes were often grouped together in some variation of the triad of 'war, weapon, and Superhero' play (Holland, 2003). Conflating these ludic¹ themes

¹ The term 'ludic' is employed synonymously with 'play' throughout this thesis. This is not to discount the possible presence of 'epistemic play' or indeed to re-instantiate a binary typology of play. The choice of terms is due to the emphasis of the study on imaginative rather than problem-solving aspects of play, the latter often being associated with the term 'epistemic play' (Wood, 2013).

relates more to adult 'troubles' over aggressively-themed, media-referenced play than to necessarily similar characteristics between the play themes. Superhero play, for instance, does not necessarily include physical violence or death; and, when death and violence occur, they can be exercised through 'powers' rather than 'weapons'. Second, the debate was highly polarised between claims over the benefits and pitfalls of such play; in other words, the literature has tended to pivot around the question of whether there are grounds for allowing or prohibiting, or at least diverting, play about death and violence. In contrast, there have been few studies on the social ecology of death/violence play including what happens and how it is negotiated (Goldstein, 1995) and existing literature tends to be under-theorised (Galbraith, 2007; Holland, 2003).

Third, and certainly a related point, the discussion seemed laden with 'moral panic' (e.g. see discussion in Mechling, 2008) about such play, much as I had encountered amongst my preschool community. Fears that media and video-game inspired violently-themed play would lead to future violence – exacerbated by horror at violent crimes committed by children (such as the murder of James Bulger by two 10-year-old boys in 1993 in the UK and the 'Columbine High School massacre' in Colorado, USA, in 1999), were countered with claims that false panics were fuelling the attack on "boys" play. Indeed, the conflicting claims of research evidence about the developmental and longitudinal implications of such play have been frequently remarked upon (Galbraith, 2007; Goldstein, 1995; Holland, 2003; Parsons and Howe, 2006).

As Johnson (1997, pp.103-4) points out: 'The power of moral panics is such that it matters little whether a real danger exists; once a moral panic is marked and defined, it does exist, it does objectify, and it does influence.' These 'panics' have meant that in schools and early childhood settings, in the Anglophone world at least, death/violence play has often been prohibited. Holland's (2003) work, for instance, suggests that for the past 30 years, although unwritten, most early childhood settings in London, UK, have had a zero tolerance policy towards such play and the General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers in England and Wales has been quoted as saying that the use of toy weapons in schools and nurseries is unacceptable to its membership (Gaunt, 2008). A survey conducted by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987, cited in Doliopoulou, 1998) found that many American educators similarly banned such play. Outside of the English-speaking world, Doliopoulou's (1998) survey of 100 early childhood educators in Athens suggests that war play (a broad definition seemed to be at work here as Power Ranger play was cited as a part of war play) is allowed by only 3% of teachers. The others prevent (15%), ban (4%), or limit (78%) it in some way.

More recently, there have been stories of suspensions and questioning of young children who bring toy weapons to school: online headlines include 'Cowboy-style cap gun gets 5-year-old suspended from school in Calvert County' (George, 2013) and 'Washington School Suspends Students Who Brought Nerf Toy Guns Weapons for Probability Experiment, But Teacher Unscathed' (Tanquintic-Misa, 2013). Bans on toy weapons and violently-themed play were (and still are) commonly justified through concerns that the play is limited by media scripts (Boyatzis, Matillo and Nesbitt, 1995; Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990; Cupit, 1996) or that such play is linked to aggression (Dunn and Hughes, 2001; Goldstein, 1995; Levin, 2006; Sanson and Muccio, 1993), despite the extensive critiques that have been levelled at reductionist views of causation including in relation to both media (Buckingham, 2000; Tobin, 2000) and death/violence play (Goldstein, 1995) on later violence.

There have been moves more recently however, at least in the UK, to lift the ban on death/violence play suggesting that the pendulum is swinging to the other side of the polarised debate. Much of this is justified through research which suggests that death/violence play, at least in relation to Superhero figurines, is not linked to aggression (Parsons and Howe, 2006) or that there are numerous methodological limitations to research which infers a causal link between the two (see Goldstein, 1995, for a helpful discussion). Such arguments often make recourse to naturalised views of childhood play and gender coupled with the discursive construction of a 'crisis' (Browne, 2004; Moreau, 2011) in boys' (purported) underachievement in education (e.g. see Mechling, 2008, for an example of this). By way of example, a recent government publication in England encourages educators not only to lift bans on death/violence play but to actively encourage and facilitate it 'so that boys' interests in these forms of play can be fostered through healthy and safe risk-taking [which] will enhance every aspect of their learning and development' (DCSF, 2007, p.16). An *Express* headline – 'Let boys have guns, say experts' – reports on the advice of Learning and Teaching Scotland, a government agency advocating allowing boys to play with guns (Turner, 2008). Indeed a body of research suggests that death/violence play can be cathartic (Singer, 1994), as well as support the growth of imagination and social relationships (Holland, 2003), physical skills when associated with rough and tumble play (Pellegrini, 2006), and literacy – at least in relation to death/violence play involving superheroes (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 1999).

This brief survey paints a picture of the general trends in relation to death/violence play within educational institutions in the Anglophone world; although, the debates provoked by 'gun meets butterflies' are an indication that such policies and discourses are never

entirely pervasive and totalising, nor are interpretations and enactments of these policies entirely consistent. Regardless, competing claims in the literature regarding developmental implications left me with scant understanding of the social ecology of children's death/violence play. The focus on the futurity of the developing child or the 'naturalness' of play made little room for understanding the subtle and contextual negotiations undertaken by players in the present. In contrast, it seemed to me that any pedagogical responses to death/violence play necessarily required, or at very least would benefit from, a sociological/anthropological understanding of the ludic activity including its spatio-temporal, social, conventional, symbolic, and embodied features.

The more I looked at the existing literature, the more I was struck by the abundance of work examining adult concerns, values, and understandings of death/violence play in comparison to the virtual absence of children's perspectives in the literature focusing on such play. Given the proliferation of research with children over the past two decades, drawing on insights from the social studies of childhood that children are social actors who can contribute to an understanding of the social world, this void seemed particularly noteworthy. One notable exception to this is the work of Brian Edmiston (2008) which not only involves consideration of children's perspectives, but offers a more nuanced approach to death/violence play.² As much of this thesis will be situated in critical dialogue with his work, it is worth describing here in some detail.

Drawing upon a long-term case study of co-playing with his son Michael, Edmiston (2008) argues that adult-child death/violence play – 'mythic play' in his formulation – is a context for exploring ethical issues and, by extension, constructing ethical identities. Ethical identities, according to Edmiston (2008, p.20), are 'frameworks for evaluating how they [children] ought to identify with other people and act in the world'. He suggests that because mythic play is often emotionally intense and involves 'stark choices' and extreme consequences, players are compelled to consider timeless questions about the nature of life and death, right and wrong, and good and evil. Edmiston (2008, p.74) argues, 'Play events are like various lenses that children can use to examine aspects of life. Play lenses magnify or focus children's (and adults') concerns about the world to make them more visible and subject to interaction.' In Edmiston's (2008) estimation, play is a site where children exercise a great deal of agency; as such, he posits play – more than abstract discussion – as a crucial site of ethical exploration and authoring.

² Two other examples are Galbraith's (2007) ethnographic study of Superhero play in an American early childhood setting and Wegener-Spohring's (1989) interview-based research with fourth graders in Germany about 'war' play.

At some points, Edmiston (2008) suggests that ethical identities are formed through the process of exploring the motivations, concerns, and fears of different characters or 'possible selves'. As characters, children can be evil, brutal, or dominating in imagined worlds where existing culture and social rules do not necessarily apply, allowing ethical exploration of the consequences of their actions on other characters in the play. There is some ambiguity in his formulation, however, as at other times, Edmiston (2008, p.22) asserts that it is 'when children are *answerable* for their imagined actions [that] they are forming their ethical identities' [my italics]. This is significant as one formulation suggests that taking different character's *perspectives* allows for ethical explorations and ultimately the formation of ethical identities. The other suggests that taking the perspective of a different character is insufficient as it is a particular type of character *action* which leads to the formation of ethical identities. Regardless, Edmiston's (2008) work is important for considering death/violence play and its relation to personhood: he suggests ethical identities do not just remain in play, as the ethical questions prompted by mythic play allow children to explore their own potential for 'evil' and good beyond play.

Whilst I am generally sympathetic to Edmiston's (2008) nuanced interpretations of death/violence play and the spaces of answerability it may allow, the contextual limits and conceptual problematics it sustains provide a useful way of situating my own interventions into the field. Based on dyadic play with his son in their family home in Ohio, USA, his research is clearly distinguishable from the diverse, multi-player, and highly regulated contexts of early childhood settings in the UK, where the data was generated for this thesis. To assume common issues, negotiations, and processes in death/violence play in these two settings would not only be misleading but would deny the emergent nature of social phenomena in diverse contexts with multiple causes and distinctive social relations. This is not to deny all recognisability of phenomena or the possible for 'analytic generalizability' (Robson, 2002) of conceptual questions, explanations, and insights across contexts, but to suggest the importance of thick description and situated, multidimensional analysis (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008; Sayer, 2000).

Conceptually, Edmiston's (2008) work is premised on a number of limiting assumptions. First, he seems to suggest that children necessarily need the presence of an adult for ethical explorations in play. This diminishes children's potential for collaborative moral and political action as well as introducing an *a priori* inflation of the position of adults as superior political and ethical beings. A second problematic to some extent relies upon my reading of Edmiston's (2008) claims about how ethical

identities are formed in play: whilst taking on different characters may compel players to consider others' perspectives, this in itself is insufficient for forming ethical identities in interpersonal engagements. Edmiston (2008) seems to romanticise children or exaggerate adult knowledge and ability, assuming that what is taken from such play interactions will be an ethical orientation to the world. Regardless of the accuracies of my reading of his work in this instance, this point remains relevant: the movement between play and everyday³ worlds, as well as the relations between ethics, politics, and identifications with characters, cannot be assumed *a priori* and therefore bear further elaboration.

I will return to Edmiston's (2008) work throughout this thesis as both a source of further clarification and site of productive critique, but as a final note at this point, he implies that play is not only theoretically, but in practice, a world of endless possibility. This, however, curtails investigation of the impact of inequitable social relations in the everyday world on play worlds. For instance, Edmiston (2008) relegates his daughter's lack of involvement in mythic play, in comparison to his son's avid engagements, to a matter of personal interest which runs the risk of reifying desire, locating the wish to be particular characters or even to engage in death/violence play within the individual, 'natural' child. This negates the social production of desire, including the reasons that particular play becomes possible and alluring at particular moments as well as the regulation of who can participate and embody particular characters, topics which will be taken up within this thesis. His overarching move to elevate mythic play to a high status in the formation of ethical identities has serious implications for those children – often girls, given the gendered presentation of mythic play in popular and cultural texts/media – who do not engage in such activity. By way of contrast, I remain convinced that everyday activity, including play, cannot be separated from the inequitable organisation of the social order. With its themes of domination, strength, brutality, and mortality combined with its association with boys (Goldstein, 1995; Mechling, 2008; Wegener-Spohring, 1989), death/violence play is a nexus for considering the articulation of inequalities in early years settings. Indeed, a series of critical studies of play cultures have indicated similarly (Browne, 2004; Davies, 1989; Marsh, 2000; Skattebol, 2005), although their focus was not on death/violence play.

³ The term 'everyday' is being used in this thesis as a counterpoint to 'play'. This is slightly deceptive, not least because play is an everyday practice for many young children. See sections 2.4 and 6.1 for a more detailed rationale and an elaboration of the relationship posited between play and the everyday.

1.2 Introduction to the research

On a general level, the thesis seeks to elucidate the complex relations of death/violence play to wider discursive, spatial, and material formations, particularly with inequitable social relations in the everyday world. Building upon the work of Edmiston (2008), the thesis also aims to explore the potential spaces of transformation afforded by imaginative play. More specifically, the thesis will provide an ethnographic account of one early childhood setting in London, UK, considering the questions:

- What is the social ecology⁴ of death/violence play from the perspective of participants in Westside Nursery, including children, educators, and, to a certain extent, family members? What is it about death/violence play which makes certain interactions or events possible? How do children's (and adults') motives, reasons, and practices impact on death/violence play in the setting?
- How do relations of inequality shape the conditions of possibility in death/violence play? How do children interpret, utilise, reframe, transgress, and/or transform inequities in their death/violence play? What about the context allows these practices to be 'successful' or not?
- How are negotiations in play constitutive of everyday social relations in the setting?

As noted above, death/violence play has often been grouped as 'war' or 'war, weapon, and Superhero play'. In seeking to clarify the object of this study, the focus was on death/violence play which involved imaginary death and pretend physical violence which had the intent of killing, maiming, or stopping another character(s). Acts of violence were not distinguished based on the explanations given by players/characters. Acts of physical violence sometimes included weapons, superpowers, or bodily engagement, but this was not a requirement for inclusion. This focus on play involving physical violence, and potentially but not necessarily 'symbolic' violence⁵ involving the 'imposition of a certain universe of meaning' or the 'systemic' violence of exploitation and social relations of inequality (Žižek, 2008, p.2), was not an evaluative decision based on the misplaced notion that physical violence is more consequential. Indeed, the cultural emphasis on physical violence enacted by an 'identifiable agent', argues Žižek (2008, pp.11-12), can 'obliterat[e]...from view other forms of violence'. The focus on death/physical violence relates to the methodological necessity of setting a deliberate and relatively coherent frame around the object of study. Whilst symbolic

⁴ The term 'social ecology' is being used here in a general sense to refer to the interactions between the socio-cultural, institutional, material, and spatial-temporal in relation to the object of study and more specifically what happens in the situated context of death/violence play and how it is negotiated (Goldstein, 1995).

⁵ The term 'symbolic violence' has a particular provenance and specific meaning in the work of Bourdieu; however, it will be used more generally in this thesis as indicated above.

and systemic violence have not provided such a frame, they are, however, central to the analytic lines pursued here. Including death in the parameters of the play under investigation was based on the assumption that death may be the outcome of violence, although as a focus of study this held open the possibility that death can take place in different situations. Such a definition allowed consideration of the different forms of play narrative in which children mobilised death and violence themes, as well as the potentially diverse responses to similar acts in various narratives. As a final note, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, this framing was not easily applied: for instance, it is often difficult to separate pretend and 'real' physical violence.

1.3 An outline of the thesis

Thus far, the purpose of this brief opening narrative was to lay out the contentious and problematic ground on which this thesis builds.⁶ This final section will provide an outline of the thesis as a whole, beginning from its basic premise: the lives children lead in the present are worthy of study in and of themselves as distinct, although inseparable, from whom children will be in the future and as embedded within broader institutions such as family and early childhood settings. This is a move, central to the social studies of childhood, to grant children a form of conceptual, but not practical, autonomy from adults (Thorne, 1987).

Conceptually, this thesis engages a variety of intellectual disciplines and theoretical traditions in productive dialogue with each other, a form of interdisciplinary 'bricolage' (Kincheloe, 2001). 'Deep interdisciplinarity', Kincheloe (2001, p.681) argues, offers an approach which seeks to move between and beyond 'the discursive strictures of one disciplinary approach'. The crucial point here is that the social world is complex and multifaceted, with no single theory or discipline able to provide a privileged or exhaustive accounting of human experience. Indeed, interdisciplinarity offers a potential for 'finding innovative solutions to the problems at hand', crucial in relation to studies of the 'complex phenomena' of children and childhood (Alanen, 2012, p.420).

This is not to deny critiques of interdisciplinarity which suggest that it leads to superficiality, giving emphasis to breadth over depth; nor is it an attempt to brush over significant and long-standing divergences between disciplines and traditions. Indeed, every effort will be made to consider the possibilities and impossibilities – the (im)possibilities – as well as productivities of the relations between the theoretical and disciplinary traditions employed. Disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity do not need to be

⁶ Further review of empirical research will be integrated throughout the thesis as relevant.

viewed as mutually exclusive, Alanen (2012) notes however: deep interdisciplinarity involves expert insights into debates, assumptions, concepts, and methods within different disciplines. As a result, deep interdisciplinarity is difficult to achieve, potentially more of an aspiration than reality, albeit one that guides this thesis.

Drawing on this interdisciplinary approach, in Chapter 2, I will go on to provide a conceptual framing of the subject of study, broadly informed by a materialist feminist view of intersecting inequalities augmented by a critical realist meta-level theorisation of ontology, epistemology, and structure-agency debates. More specifically, the chapter will elaborate an understanding of childhood as part of generationed social relations and provide an account of one of, if not the, primary mode of activity ascribed to early childhood in the 'First World/North'⁷: play.⁸ Chapter 3 will present the methods of data generation and analysis used in this ethnographic study, including a discussion of the potentials of knowledge produced through ethnography.

Analysis of data generated in this study is separated into six chapters. The first of these, Chapter 4, uses thick description to situate sociospatial relations in Westside Nursery geographically and historically within new capitalism⁹, thus contextualising the account offered in this thesis. Building on this general overview, Chapter 5 provides a more micro-level description of social activity, policy imperatives, and constructions of childhood related to death/violence play at Westside Nursery. The chapter brings the shifting and contradictory perspectives and practices of educators into conversation with an overview of children's death/violence play at Westside Nursery.

Chapters 6-8 focus on some of the ambiguous and contradictory aspects of children's death/violence play. Chapter 6 considers the relationship between play and everyday worlds, specifically considering how intersecting inequalities in the everyday world not only inform the conditions of possibility for ludic interactions but can serve to inscribe ludic characters and dispositions on players in the everyday world. Whilst Chapter 6

⁷ Terminology is both imprecise and inadequate for the job of describing complex and shifting global relations. Whilst recognising these deficiencies, Mohanty (2003), a feminist post-colonial scholar, points to the necessity of indicating global inequalities resulting from colonialism and capitalism. Following her elaboration, this thesis will employ the terms 'First World/North' and 'Third World/South', albeit with a note of caution given changing geo-political landscape and the level of internal homogeneity they imply.

⁸ The point here is not that children do not play in the 'Third World/South', but that it is generally considered a secondary activity accomplished either during or after work activity (Gaskins, Haight and Lancy, 2006).

⁹ Various terminologies could be used here. I use 'new capitalism' following Fairclough (2003) and Sennett (1998) to indicate the past 40 years of global re-structuring and rescaling (such as privatisation, de- and re-regulation, and the prominence of supra-national bodies) which have not, however, disturbed capitalism's fundamental social relations.

considers the way that others view and relate to players, Chapter 7 considers the ways in which players relate to, or indeed identify, with ludic characters and narratives. A notion of dialogic bodies is put forward as a way to conceptualise this deeply embodied process. Building on this line of argument, Chapter 8 analyses the presence of fundamentally transformable characters in death/violence play at Westside Nursery. The implications of potential identifications with such mobile selves, particularly in relation to new forms of flexible personhood desirable in new capitalism, are considered.

The final data chapter (Chapter 9), which is unconventionally also the concluding chapter, draws together the arguments made in previous chapters, highlighting the complexity of death/violence play as both a site where inequalities are reproduced but also one that offers possibilities for enacting new social imaginaries. In drawing the thesis to a close, the implications of such ambiguous play are considered for pedagogical projects concerned with equality and social transformation.

To conclude, this opening narrative has outlined the genesis of the present study and the problematic in which this thesis seeks to make an incision: death/violence play and its relation to the renewal, reworking, and transformation of inequalities. The next chapter will move towards a conceptual framing of this object of study.

CHAPTER 2:

A conceptual introduction to the 'object' of study

The previous chapter set the scene for the present study in terms of its genesis, focus, and relation to popular, professional, and academic literature as well as delineating the object of study at a concrete level. The present chapter works at two levels: generally it will clarify the epistemological, ontological, and theoretical starting points of the thesis and, more specifically, it will offer a description of how three main concepts – inequities, childhood, and play – help frame the 'object' of study. Equally, this study seeks to make interventions into debates in these three areas of inquiry, the nature of which will be highlighted in the following sections. Whilst this is not a critical realist study in a strict sense¹⁰, I will draw largely on original critical realism as proposed by Bhaskar (1998b; Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998) and constructively critiqued and developed by others (primarily Archer, 1998; Collier, 1994; Sayer, 2000) to clarify these frames at the meta-theoretical level. As Sayer (2000) points out, critical realism offers an alternative to the dichotomous poles of debate which dominate much social science research: positivism/empiricism versus relativism; a view of society as rule-bound or as only interpretive; and, modernist reductionism opposed to post-structural dismissals of any possibility of reliable knowledge production and progress.

2.1 Epistemological possibilities and ontological presuppositions

Delineating an object of study involves making a cut in an 'open system', where it is impossible to shut out multiple interacting and interdependent phenomena in the context under study. Indeed, the social world is not rule-bound, making regularity and prediction unlikely if not impossible (Bhaskar, 1998b). Making a cut in an 'open system' is troubling to the extent that it erects artificial boundaries around a subject, running the risk of prompting interpretations that are based more on these instantiated borders than on the object, or referent, itself. For instance, studying play in institutions based on age segregation, such as early childhood settings, can make age-based peer cultures appear natural. Such cuts necessarily simplify the complexities of social life in some way given that a focus on one aspect of an object of study or utilisation of one lens of

¹⁰ This distinction is drawn because: (1) The study does not include exegesis of critical realist texts but uses some texts to situate the study on a meta-theoretical level, (2) The thesis does not engage with later developments in critical realism including dialectical critical realism, and (3) Critical realist concepts are not directly employed in the analysis of data. In many ways this is 'lower case' critical realism as differentiated from what Callinicos (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2002) refers to as a Critical Realist 'movement', arguing the latter veers towards 'sectarianism' and overinflated claims about what is possible from a philosophy based largely on transcendental arguments.

interpretation rather than another produces an outside which is excluded from analysis. Focusing on play narrative can, for instance, render character development an 'outside' and investigating the cultural can displace the economic.

A related tension is that description of an object of study is inherently unable to capture all elements of the social world which is characterised by contradiction, multiplicity in causal relations, change, and becoming (Bhaskar, 1998b; Collier, 1994; Sayer, 2000). The corollary of this point is that that any description likely presents an overly stable and universal sense of its object, at worst seeming 'fixed' in deterministic relations. Such potential reification – where contingencies are presented or appear immanent and necessary to the phenomena itself (e.g. see Bourdieu, 1984, pp.147-152, on this in relation to sociological description) – is compounded in relation to the object of this study by influential interpretations of developmental psychology. In this common approach to the study of both childhood and play, children's activity tends to be rooted or fixed in their individual or collective 'natures', as in the example in Chapter 1 of the conflation of boys' death/violence play with biological and psychological structures which offers a decontextualised and overgeneralised view of gender and play interests to say the least. This is not to imply that all social phenomena are entirely contingent, or that phenomena have no limiting conditions either of constraint or potential, but that this is a matter for investigation rather than a *a priori* assumption (Sayer, 2000).

These points notwithstanding, description and explanation in social science is not a doomed endeavour, but involves attention to the limits and risks involved, and therefore an acceptance of the fallibility of knowledge. Knowledge about a phenomena, in this sense, is about 'practical adequacy' rather than all-or-nothing understandings of truth which Moore (2004) attributes to 'strong' social constructionist¹¹ and positivist conceptions of knowledge. Practical adequacy, on the other hand, refers to 'the extent to which it generates expectations about the world and about results of our actions which are realised' (Sayer, 2000, p.43). Fallible views of truth hold that knowledge will inevitably be modified and developed through further investigation and changing socio-historical contexts, but significantly this does not deny the possibilities of knowledge production. While such epistemological relativism is to be expected in an open system, critical realism does not accept judgemental relativism and instead argues that we can

¹¹ Sayer (2000) distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' social constructionism. Both forms similarly recognise the role of the *social* production of ideas and practices, but the former view of social constructionism displaces all possibility of making any type of adequate description of the referent and indeed often denies the presence of a referent at all: from this perspective words only refer to other words, signifiers to the signified. References to 'social construction' can also be distinguished based on whether they take into account material influences on phenomena or only the cultural as I will discuss below in relation to childhood.

evaluate the 'reliability of our knowledge-producing procedures' (Moore, 2004, p.164) with some explanations proving to be more 'practically adequate' than others (Sayer, 2000). Part of evaluating practical adequacy involves attending to the way that the boundaries imposed on an object of study – as well as the assumptions, theoretical resources, and commitments brought by the researcher (referred to as the 'transitive' dimension in critical realism) – impose limits on understandings and influence interpretations of the 'intransitive dimension'. The intransitive dimension refers to the objects – including objects of knowledge, people, phenomena, events, and so on – which exist regardless of the status of our knowledge about them (Collier, 1994).

The distinction that is fundamental to uphold, according to critical realism, is between *being* and *knowing*, or the ontological status of a phenomena and our understanding of it. Crucially, critical realism holds that objects and phenomena have an ontological presence beyond their existence in mental activity, unlike hermeneutical or 'strong' constructionism which reduces the social world to our understandings and beliefs about it with all meanings inherently self-referential and trapped in the realm of the symbolic (Sayer, 2000). On the other hand, this is not a reversion to an empiricist view of reality where the world is limited to what we can experience through sense data which in turn is considered theory-neutral or uninfluenced by conceptual categories: to put it more cogently, empiricism suggests a version of the world where 'what you see is what exists'. Instead critical realism understands reality as having ontological depth in three regards: the distinction between being and knowing, as discussed above; transfactuality; and stratification (Bhaskar, 1998a).

Put simply, causal transfactuality refers to the way that our experiences cannot be explained only by what we can see but by 'structures' which may not be observable and, therefore, may only be known in their potentially contradictory effects (Sayer, 2000). In the social world, 'structures' – such as beliefs about and the organisation of childhood, the functioning of neo-liberalism, and the division of labour – are best understood as 'systems of human relationships among social positions' (Porpora, 1998, p.339) as well as relations between these relations. Such an understanding can be contrasted with views of social structures as immutable patterns of human behaviour, stable or fixed frameworks of action, or conventions and rules. While structures set limits of constraint and possibility, they are not deterministic in the sense of setting predictable and regular events into motion, due to their variable interaction with multiple other generative mechanisms in 'open systems' (Sayer, 2000) and crucially structures are not timeless or invariant. By way of example, capitalism is a structure which is made up of necessary and contingent relations. Without the relation

between wage labour and capital, for instance, capitalism as a structure would cease to be. While capitalist social relations certainly draw on structures of 'patriarchy' these are not necessary for the operations of capitalism: these inequalities are contingent as all that is necessary to capitalism is inequality in social relations of production (Cole, 2006; Hennessy, 2000; Sayer, 2000). This point does not in any way diminish the exploitation and oppression wrought by sexism or reduce the importance of efforts to challenge it, but it does help to sort out the 'necessary' and the 'contingent' aspects of particular structures as well as what will necessarily or contingently happen given the interaction of particular structures. Indeed, this is an important part of determining where to make a cut around an object of study (Sayer, 1998).

That structures can often only be known in their effects is explained in critical realism through distinctions made between our experiences of the world (referred to as the 'empirical'); events which happen in the world which we may or may not be aware of (the 'actual'); and the structures of things which make certain events possible and others not (the 'real'). Labour-power, discussed further in Chapter 8, is an example of the 'real' as it refers to the *capacity* to work: all those physical, mental, and emotional 'structures' a person embodies which create the potential conditions of what a person can and can't do in the labour process. Some, but not all, aspects of a person's labour-power are actualised in the process of waged work: the domain of the 'actual'. Our experiences of working lie in the empirical world, where we, for instance, may or may not be aware of the instantiation of particular labour-power capacities rather than others and what we can 'observe' is limited to those aspects of labour-power potential which have been actualised rather than the 'real' structures of labour-power and the capital-labour relation which it entails. As an early childhood educator, I may realise that I am using my skills at setting up the environment for learning or facilitating conversations between children, but I may be unaware of the way my 'willingness' to sell my labour-power for wages is being instantiated each time I do so.

The principle of emergence refutes notions of causality understood in Humean terms as a constant conjunction of observable events (e.g. Bhaskar, 1998b; Sayer, 2000). Whilst a phenomena may repeat, even with regularity, this does not necessarily indicate a singular causal mechanism at play. Different conditions can generate the same phenomena; in critical realist terms, the activation in the domain of the 'actual' of potentiality from the domain of the 'real'. Likewise, similar conditions can produce different effects based on multiple interacting causal mechanisms in open systems. Emergence suggests phenomena are irreducible to the structures which generate

them: the ability to talk is emergent from, but not reducible to, language or physiological features of the human body.

In seeking to explain emergence, critical realism lays claim to a 'stratified ontology' where various strata are discrete and vertically layered. This is not intended to signify that one stratum is more important or influential, just that it provides an increasingly more molecular level of investigation and explanation. Whilst I would hesitate to move towards an entirely 'flattened' ontology, where oxygen, the body, and preschool policies on health and safety are analysed horizontally for instance, stratification in critical realism seems to rely too heavily on disciplinary boundaries and vertical structuring based on the objects of knowledge, rather than ontology. Sayer (1998, p.131) makes a similar point when he argues: 'A word of caution is needed to guard against any unexamined over-hasty reinterpretation of (Althusserian) 'levels' of the 'economic' 'political' and 'ideological' as distinct strata, for they may possibly be more accurately seen as different parts of the same stratum.'

What the preceding discussion suggests is that the object of this study has an ontological presence: it is an investigation into real children, leading real lives, and engaged in real practices. This is not to deny the generative influence of researcher presence on the field of study nor is it to deny the way that beliefs and values shape not only the 'cut' made around the object of study but researcher, as well as participant, practices and interpretations. All of these points necessitate careful 'carving up' of objects of study with consideration of the 'structure' of related phenomena and thorough conjunctural conceptualisations: if the structure of things changes, then conceptualisations must as well (Sayer, 1998). This is particularly the case in studies of social objects due to the concept dependence of phenomena: understandings and interpretations of the world in part shape the world. While concurring with interpretivist views of the world that 'reasons can be causes', critical realism maintains that 'there are unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions and things can happen to people regardless of their understandings' (Sayer, 2000, p.20). The world cannot be reduced to relations between the sign (word) and the referent (object), as they are in empiricism, nor to relations between the signifier (word) and the signified (concept) as they are in strong social constructionism, but to relations between the signifier, signified, and referent – what Bhaskar (2006) refers to as the semiotic triangle.

In sum, then, critical realism acts in this thesis as a way to clarify meta-theoretical concerns, namely ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and the need for judgemental reliability given the 'messiness' of open systems (Bhaskar and Lawson,

1998). Critical realism acts as a caution and aid in delineating the object of study, a process begun in section 1.2 and developed conceptually in this chapter. Throughout the thesis, critical realism will be developed more precisely in relation to this study, for instance in conceptualising the relation between causality and data analysis (section 3.5.1) and in offering meta-theoretical links between specific theoretical tools employed herein. Following these meta-theoretical points, the subsequent sections of this chapter will discuss the way key concepts – inequalities, childhood, and play – will be theorised in this thesis.

2.2 Materialist feminist approaches to understanding inequalities

At its broadest and most abstract level of analysis, this thesis seeks to examine the enduring presence of inequalities. As Sayer (2000, p.13) points out:

In virtue of the remarkable sensitivity of people to their contexts – which derives particularly from our ability to interpret situations rather than merely being passively shaped by them – social phenomena rarely have the durability of many of the objects studied by natural science, such as minerals or species. Where they are relatively enduring, as many institutions are, then this is usually an intentional achievement, a product of making continual changes in order to stay the same, or at least to maintain continuities through change, rather than a result of doing nothing.

Whilst this quote is indicative of the effort needed to reproduce inequalities, it is also suggestive of the space for change: inequalities can also be transformed. More concretely, then, this thesis will consider how inequalities are reproduced or transformed in children's everyday activity, specifically death/violence play.

Inequalities, and their intersections, have been conceptualised from a wide variety of perspectives and starting points (e.g. within the recent literature on intersectionality alone see, for instance, Acker, 2006; Bilge, 2010; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012). Materialist feminism offers one approach which I find particularly helpful for conceptualising intersectional inequalities, given the concern not only with elucidating but also transforming inequitable social relations. My use of the term 'materialist feminism' follows Hennessy and Ingraham (1997a) to a large extent: this term nods to historical materialist perspectives taken up in feminist writings from broadly Marxist and Socialist traditions. Whilst critiquing strains of Marxism for being 'gender blind' and certain feminisms for being 'ahistorical and insufficiently materialist'¹²

¹² The 'material' cannot be taken for granted conceptually nor does it offer a sufficient basis for distinguishing a particular form of feminism, argue Rahman and Witz (2003). They point to the diverse ways in which the term has been used and, from their perspective, stretched beyond use to reference: the narrowly economic, a broader understanding of the political-economy which includes social reproduction in

(Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997a, p.6), materialist feminists have aimed to accommodate both Marxist and feminist insights – and increasingly and importantly anti-racist and post-colonial analyses – to theorise the way that inequalities cannot, in the present, be understood separately from the workings of capital.

Before outlining materialist feminist perspectives on inequalities in more depth, a brief point of clarification is necessary: situating a materialist feminist approach in relation to critical realism. The distinction here is between theory and meta-theory. Critical realism operates on a meta-theoretical level similar to empiricism and social constructionism, in that it seeks to clarify ontological, epistemological, and methodological points generally in relation to the social (and natural) sciences. As Bhaskar and Danermark (2006, p.295) explain: ‘Implicitly or explicitly, metatheory informs you as to what you can/cannot do (and even see) and what kind of knowledge you can/cannot obtain.’ What critical realism does not do is theorise how and in what ways generative mechanisms interact in their concrete and contingent interactions in specific conjunctures. These are the matter of specific theories of social science and empirical investigation. It is here that materialist feminism has a theoretical role to play in conceptualising inequalities and, suffice it to note here, there are intellectual and political affinities between critical realism and materialist feminism.¹³

Whilst materialist feminism is not a widely used term and many of the authors drawn on in this thesis would likely not constitute themselves as ‘materialist feminists’ they can be viewed as locating their work broadly within the following suppositions. First, there is a concern in both understanding and challenging the persistence of inequality, which endures despite the recognition – shared with critical realism – of the complexities and dynamism of social practices and formations. In seeking to understand enduring inequalities, materialist feminism has a concern not only in documenting specific articulations of inequality, but an interest in theorising *why* these contingent forms of social organisation come to be understood in the way they are and

all its forms, embodied practices, physical matter including corporeality, and even the effect of discourse in certain post-structuralist renderings. For the purposes of this thesis, as the ensuing discussion will establish, the emphasis is on the importance of conceptualising embodied practices within historically situated modes of social production – regardless of whether the term ‘material’ is sufficient.

¹³ Bhaskar (1991, p. 143-144, cited in Peter, 2002, p.728) explains the relationship to Marxism more broadly in the following manner: ‘Marx’s work at its best illustrates critical realism; and critical realism is the absent methodological fulcrum of Marx’s work’. Further, the ‘transitive dimension’ as well as critiques of empiricism and idealism within critical realism are informed by Marxist theories of the commodity form, fetishism, and society and both share emancipatory concerns. As Nielsen (2007) points out, however, the diversity and debates within each tradition make any simplistic comparison difficult: sympathies between the two are conceivable but not guaranteed particularly when critical realism is taken up in work informed by non-Marxist theory, although there have been substantive efforts to bring the traditions together.

indeed their historical conditions of possibility. At the root of these theorisations is the assumption that there is a relationship between 'practices or ways of making sense (i.e., discourses) that displace, condense, compensate, mask, and contest the basic inequality of capitalism' (Hennessy, 2000, p.11) and historical changes in the organisation of the material conditions of life, including productive activities and the international division of labour. Materialist feminism, therefore, presents a relentlessly de-naturalised, non-essentialist view of gender and 'race'. In other words, gender is not an ontological given, but is socially constructed.

At the same time, I am also compelled by more recent efforts to include a focus on the 'matter' of materiality – such as the body, senses, and spatiality – and their relation to capital. In Bordo's (1998) terms, this involves an insistence on the 'fleshiness' of bodies involved in social practices situated in particular spatial-temporal locations. Much of the 'new materialism' within feminist thought has radically different epistemological roots than the materialist feminism I have been discussing thus far, drawing as it does on post-structural theorising or efforts to reinstate the body lost in feminist theorising which focuses solely on the social construction of gender (Rahman and Witz, 2003). These distinctions notwithstanding, as Bordo (1998) and others (e.g. Howes, 2005a) note, such an emphasis on embodied, sensory being and concrete practices have their roots in Marx's theoretical project. Further, critical realism – with its emphasis on charting the complex and emergent relations between ontological stratum – suggests the value and importance of such efforts, albeit without re-instantiating the grounds for inequalities based on assumptions of the 'naturalness' of gendered and racialised bodies. Instead, as Rahman and Witz (2003, p.256) point out, this work is important in 'sometimes admitting, sometimes asserting the body as a problematic yet inescapable component of a social ontology of gender and sexuality.' Embodiment will be taken up further in Chapter 8.

A materialist feminist analysis points to four interconnected areas of analysis in constituting its object of study (Jackson, 2001): (1) Social relations and structures such as the international division of labour, the heterosexual marriage contract, the nuclear family, and the continuing legacy of colonialism; (2) Meaning, knowledge, conventions, and discourses; (3) Everyday practice as located in specific conjunctures; and, (4) Personhood including desires and psychic investments. This can be distinguished from post-structural feminism which, according to Jackson (2001), dismisses structures and abstracts practices from their socio-historic contexts. These aspects of materialist feminist analysis will inform the present study: for instance, the constitution of

personhood will be taken up further in Chapter 7 and analysis of the stratification of labour will inform discussion in Chapter 8.

This has been a necessarily brief and incomplete gloss of materialist feminist thought (see Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997b; Rahman and Witz, 2003, p. for more detailed interrogations of internal debates) as the purpose here is to broadly outline a materialist feminist understanding of inequities. For despite important advances towards political equality, the 'gritty materialities' (Apple, 2006, p.468) of social and economic inequity persist. Within the broadly materialist feminist project there is a move to understand inequalities as not only related to wage-labour relations – as in forms of economic Marxism – but as broadly related to: production, provision, and the reproduction of labour-power; the symbolic and discursive; and, indeed embodied practices and the self.

Given the emphasis on situated analysis within specific space-time configurations, structures of inequality are understood as being varied in their effects on different groups (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997b). Vogel (1997) suggests that while all women experience inequity in a political sense, it is working-class women who experience economic inequity due to the gendered division of wage labour and their role in the reproduction of labour-power. This economic subordination results in lower wages and segregation in particular types of work as well as providing unpaid labour in the home. This reproduction of labour-power, including care for children and the elderly within the home, is identified as an invisible contribution to the economy. However, she suggests that it is the contradictory need for both reproductive labour and waged work that has led to differential conditions for different groups, such as family wages for some workers and barrack housing for migrant workers. Notably, these distinctions cannot be separated from the legacy of colonial expansionism, the global division of labour, and forced migration (Jackson, 2001).

Indeed, that a connection between 'race', gender, and class inequities exists is generally accepted but how to theorise the relationship is contentious (Bilge, 2010). In general, materialist feminist theorising argues that there are ontological – not ethical – differences between class and other forms of inequity. This argument has its conceptual roots in a relational, rather than categorical, understanding of inequalities. A relational understanding of class takes into account the defining role of the exploitation of labour by capital, without which capitalism would cease to exist (Gimenez, 2001). As noted in the previous section, it is theoretically possible to have gender or 'race' equality under capitalism; yet, class equality is an oxymoron as class inequality is a defining feature of capitalism. As Pollert (1996, p.643) points out exploitative social

relations between labour and capital are the dynamic 'motor' which perpetuate, and indeed are necessary to, capitalism whilst social relations of gender, for instance, can shift and change without fundamentally altering either the organisation of provisioning and survival or 'abolishing all gender relations'.

Other ontological distinctions can be made between class inequalities and 'race' and gender. Survival in a capitalist economy relies primarily on the economic outcomes of class relations (Gimenez, 2001) in the form of the financial resources necessary for, at the very least, food, clothing, housing, and health care. This is not to deny the presence of other forms of inequality, but to note that these often articulate through class and its outcomes rather than the other way around: it is often (although not always given the complexity of intersecting inequalities) women and people of colour in the international division of labour who are found in the lower ends of the segregated division of labour in lower paying or unpaid sectors, repetitive and menial work, and low status occupations (Westerfaard, 1995, p. 145 as cited in Moore, 2004, p.11).

Despite these ontological distinctions, materialist feminists tend to be critical of conceptualisations of inequalities which view them as distinct or parallel systems. Such theorisations tend towards a-historicism, for instance in presenting patriarchy and the separation of public and private spheres as existing unchanged over time (Young, 1997); deny the material weight of the gendered and racialised division of labour (Arnot, 2002); and, separate cultural and symbolic practices from the political-economy (Hennessy, 2000). Another critique of parallelist approaches is that neither 'race', class, nor gender on their own can explain people's experiences and solely taking into account single forms of oppression can lead to misrepresentations of complex, interacting generative mechanisms (Brewer, 1997). In responding to conceptualisations which separate and de-historicise the articulations of inequalities, Hennessy and Ingraham (1997b, p.11) argue that whilst gendered oppression predates capitalism, the 'historical forms these practices take and their use against many women in the world now are not independent of capitalism' where gendering and racialisation are integral to the creation of class inequities and divisions (Acker, 2006). This notion allows for ontological distinctions between various forms of inequality to be maintained analytically whilst recognising their complex entanglements, and indeed mutual shaping, in everyday experiences, practices, and processes. To this effect, Pollert (1996, p.646) argues:

There is a subtle but crucial difference between dualist perspectives 'positing analytically independent structures and then looking for the linkages between

them' and the view 'that social relations are constituted through processes in which the linkages are inbuilt' (Acker 1989:239).

Notably absent, however, from much of the literature on intersectionality is reference to generational inequalities. In part, this may relate to the continued naturalisation of generation which conflates childhood with the yet-to-be-socialised: a form of 'human becoming' to use Qvortrup's (1994) evocative phrase. Following this line of thought, there has been a tendency to abstract children – and institutions such as preschools which are dedicated to childhood (MacNaughton, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) – from inequitable social relations, reflecting dominant constructions of young children as innocent and un-social beings (Vandenbroeck, 2007). Preschools are not, however, 'immune from the tensions and discourses that circulate in the larger society,' argue Tobin and Kurban (2009, p.33), indeed 'none of us are immune from reflecting and reproducing our society's discriminatory thoughts, words and actions'. Given the roots of intersectional theorising in feminism, the absence of generational inequalities may also relate to the ambivalent relationship between women and children therein. As Burman (2008a) points out, in working against the conflation of women with compulsory and naturalised motherhood, where women and children are problematically subsumed into a single entity: 'womenandchildren', children and childhood have been neglected if not eschewed, at least in some feminist theorising. It is to conceptualising children, childhood, and generation – in keeping with a materialist feminist approach to intersecting inequalities – that I now turn.

2.3 Children, childhood, and generational inequalities

To this point I have outlined the critical realist starting points of this thesis: epistemological relativism and the fallibility of knowledge, ontological realism, and judgemental reliability. In accounting for the theoretical frames which are being used to delineate and conceptualise the object of this study, I have introduced a broadly materialist feminist approach to intersecting inequalities suggesting the need to develop this in light of understandings of childhood and generational inequalities, the focus of the following section.

Unlike views of childhood in developmental psychology or 'adult-centric' views of socialisation which understand children as inherently deficit and, as a result, childhood as a primarily anticipatory phase of the lifespan preceding adulthood (e.g. see Honig, 2011; Qvortrup, 2011), theorising in the social studies of childhood suggests that childhood cannot be understood as a simple reflection of an unambiguous biological state of immaturity. As Archard (2004, p.26) points out, childhood 'does not simply

carve nature at her joints or follow the physical world's given boundaries'. Here, he stresses that 'children' are the real beings who live, eat, breathe, and act in particular moments and places whilst the term 'childhood' is more generalised: what it means to be a 'young human being' abstracted from the particularities of individual children's lives. This is an important distinction which I will go on to elaborate, but in the process I will also seek to demonstrate that the way particular human beings are constituted as 'children' is a methodological question which cannot be simply presupposed in a study on 'children's' lives (Honig, 2011). While the term 'child' gestures to an intransitive 'referent' this, however, occurs through fallible transitive definitions of children and childhood: it is always an empirical question whether any classification we may hold is actually concurrent with the referent (Sayer, 2000). To put this in other terms, the 'child' has an ontological presence in that s/he exists independently of any knowledge that may exist about her/him. This is not to say, however, s/he is not impacted by these understandings given the double hermeneutic involved in studies of the social: our understandings of the world impact upon the world and our interactions with it.

One of the central tenets, then, by which the social studies of childhood distinguishes itself from other approaches to studying children is that childhood, rather than being a timeless, natural, and universal status, is understood as being socially constructed (Honig, 2011; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2004). In supporting such a claim, this thesis will argue for an understanding of the social construction of childhood as one that is not limited to discursive or representational practices, a move which serves to pit nature, culture, and the political-economy against each other. As Prout (2005, p.84) points out, if childhood is considered solely in symbolic terms this is done 'at the cost of bracketing out or expelling biology, the body and even materiality as such from its accounts of childhood'. Without moving to re-inscribe childhood with essentialised characteristics based on social constructions, it would be imprudent to suggest that biological and maturational differences are purely constructed as infants' reliance on others for survival so clearly attests. Instead, both broadly material and symbolic practices interact with conceptions of childhood and, by corollary, impact on the real lives of children. Whilst Prout (2005) focuses on corporeality, biological changes, and genetics, Qvortrup (1999; 2009b) stresses the impacts of changing technology; social relations; and economic interests and organisation. By way of example, he notes that industrialisation brought the need for workers with skills and knowledge, such as reading and symbolisation, learned in extended periods of study. Whilst campaigners had been advocating for an end to 'child labour' for some time (Hendrick, 1997), Qvortrup (2009a) notes that it was not until economic needs changed that a movement of children out of the wage labour market and into compulsory

schooling in industrialised countries took place. In the process, childhood has been increasingly sentimentalised, a 'priceless' time to be protected at all costs (Zelizer, 1994). In keeping with a critical realist understanding of emergence, such a view of children and childhood necessarily implies 'keeping the boundary between nature and culture open' (Prout, 2005, p.111) as well as the boundaries between the 'more-than-social'¹⁴, the social, and the political-economy (Hart, 2008).

In interrogating the social construction of childhood, Archard (2004) identifies three dimensions which distinguish childhood over time and place. These include when childhood is seen to begin and end, which attributes differentiate childhood from adulthood, and the relative significance accorded to these differences. Implied here is a sense that childhood is relational, relative to conceptions, attributes, and institutions associated with adulthood. Childhood implies what is *not adult*, changes to the organisation of childhood change adulthood, and vice versa, due to the internal relations between the two within a generational order (Alanen, 2001; 2011). Such notions sit well with materialist feminist conceptualisation of inequalities as relational rather than categorical; although, unlike social class where the abolition of labour-capital relations implies an end of capitalism, it is theoretically possible to change adult-child relations, or even supplement them with other generational categories such as infancy or youth, without implying the abolition of a generational order.

Mayall (2002, p.27) uses the term 'generating' to refer to this process of creating and indeed enacting relatively fixed meanings about childhood: 'whereby people come to be known as children, and whereby children and childhood acquire certain characteristics, linked to local contexts, and changing as the factors brought to bear change.' As a relational concept, generating suggests that understandings of childhood and adulthood do not remain static over time and place consistent with the argument that childhood is a social construction (Alanen, 2011); however, their form, according to Qvortrup's (2011) seminal thesis, is a 'permanent structural segment'. This does not contradict common views of childhood as a time in the lifespan, but it offers a radical reorientation in perspective. Rather than emphasising childhood as a transient, temporal period which individuals pass through, 'childhood as a structural form can never turn into anything else and least of all into adulthood as a structural form' (Qvortrup, 2011, p.27). In other words, how childhood is organised and understood may change and its membership will change at very least as people pass into adulthood, but, as a structural feature of the social, childhood remains. While this

¹⁴ Kraftl (2013) uses this term, as opposed to 'nature', to move away from the idea that biology is untouched by the social and because of the challenges of distinguishing where the social begins and ends and to highlight sociospatial relations between people, things, and spaces.

offers an important way to orient the social studies of childhood, conceptualising childhood as a 'permanent' structural feature is troubling from a critical realist, and indeed any emancipatory, perspective for at least two reasons. It implies that fundamental changes to the way social relations are organised – including but not limited to relations of domination – are not possible and, by corollary, it implies rather deterministically that classifications, such as childhood, are necessary rather than contingent parts of a social order. For these reasons the understanding of childhood taken up in this thesis is one of an enduring, rather than permanent and therefore timeless, 'structural segment'. This holds open the possibility that other logics of social ordering are possible.

Understanding childhood as an enduring structural feature allows for interrogation of the contemporary generational order, including generational inequality and relations of domination. Mayall (2002, p.40) has starkly noted that children's lived experiences are largely constrained by the decisions and actions of adults within the broader organisation of provisioning and survival in a given social field where 'the power to define it [childhood] lies with adults'. Dominant contemporary conceptions in the 'First World/North' point to childhood as a time of lack or deficiency in comparison to adulthood, a time of 'becoming' rather than 'being' (Qvortrup, 1994). The ideal, Enlightenment adult is viewed as one who is rational, autonomous, and responsible for her own actions, characteristics which children are seen to lack both quantitatively and qualitatively (Archard, 2004). 'The child' as human becoming is seen as being particularly malleable and susceptible to environmental influences.

Not all adults are equal, however, and rather than setting up a simplistic and oppositional relationship between adults and children it is necessary to consider the way that generation intersects with processes of gendering and racialisation in and between classed societies. From this perspective, childhood is not impacted by a singular structure of generation; instead childhood is differentiated, based on the way that racism, sexism, and new capitalism impact the construction, organisation, and status of childhood and, indeed, children's lived experiences (e.g. Alanen, 2011; James, 2010). While heeding Qvortrup's (2010) warning about the detrimental political effects of raising diversity and difference – as opposed to social and economic justice – to the level of principle, this thesis will argue that materialist feminist intersectional approaches to inequalities, including generation, actually enhance conceptual understandings of childhood. Negating consideration of the way that racialised and gendered class affect childhood risks the same mistakes as early feminism, critiqued for its insulation of gender from the dynamics of capitalist social relations as well as the

racism inherent in Second Wave feminism's normative discussion of women's experiences (Acker, 2006).

In disarticulating characteristics associated with childhood in essentialist perspectives, Lee (2001) offers a helpful resolution to the tension between views of children as 'beings' or 'becomings'. He begins by disentangling 'being' from its Enlightenment origins suggesting that efforts to recognise children as equal 'beings' with views that must be listened to have been premised on a sense of human beings as complete, final, and independent. Lee (2001, p.2) points out that in this 'age of uncertainty' – with its more fluid family structures and working conditions – neither adults nor children reach a point of 'stable completion and self-possession on which "being-hood" once rested'. While maintaining sentiments of equality and social justice which motivated remarkably radical calls to conceive of children as human 'beings' (Qvortrup, 2011), he seeks to reclaim the term 'becoming'. Lee (2001, p.2) proposes that it be understood as the 'potentially unlimited ways of "becoming human"'. This unsettling of the static and oppositional points of childhood and adulthood – analytically at least, if not in terms of everyday practice and social status – is helpful in that it recognises change throughout a person's lifetime while avoiding the trap of attributing false stability particularly of deficient characterisations.

This particular conceptualisation of becoming sits well with assertions made within the growing body of work in the social studies of childhood which suggests that children are competent social actors, as well as individual and collective agents of change, as opposed to passive vessels of biological or socio-political imperatives (assertions which draw in particular on the paradigmatic assumptions of childhood studies put forward by James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Whilst I appreciate the sentiment contained in these gestures, particularly the derailing of *a priori* generational distinctions about the possibility of agency, this position can end up naturalising social action and masking the complexities of agency (Honig, 2011). The question of social activity and agency is one I will return to in the final section of this chapter.

Suffice it for the present to say that whilst the term 'child' cannot be taken as an ontological given or straight-forwardly read off of chronological age, the segregation of people by age in educational institutions on a virtually global basis produces clearly bounded, albeit mutable, groups of people, who are distinguished by 'stage', responsibilities, and expectations. This categorisation is widely reinforced within early childhood settings; for example, the national early years curriculum (DfE, 2012d) distinguishes between 'children aged birth to five' who are the recipients of the curriculum and 'parents', 'providers', and 'practitioners' who are children's educators.

This age-based categorisation is reiterated beyond educational settings; for instance, at a global level, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child denotes children as those who are 0-18 years. As a result, this categorisation has conceptual and practical import and indeed has achieved some stability of meaning.¹⁵

Whilst largely leaving uncontested the broad categorisation of people into the social groups of young child and adult, this thesis will not take for granted the ascription of particular essential characteristics on to either group, for instance the way that the biological vulnerability of infants has been extended to all emotional, physical, and cognitive capabilities of children as a social group, particularly when many of these vulnerabilities may be the result of structural and institutional impositions (Mayall, 2004). The important point here is that attributions of vulnerability, incompetence, dependence, and innocence are being taken as contextual and contingent characteristics of personhood – which achieve some level of stability through generationing – rather than necessary and inherent features of those who occupy the structural position of childhood. In the process, then, I aim to contribute to understandings of contemporary childhood and by extension adulthood as well as consider the possibilities of what children are and can be.

2.4 Play: the activity of childhood?

To this point, the chapter has discussed the way that intersecting inequalities including generation will be framed and the implications of such conceptualisations on the object of study. In the course of discussing childhood and the generational order, the preceding discussion was suggestive of the way that activities and spaces have become markedly generationed. Indeed, in the ‘First World/North’, childhood – and early childhood in particular – has increasingly become associated with ‘play’ (e.g. see Ailwood, 2003). Drawing on Rousseauian and Froebelian ideas about children’s ‘natural’ purity, innocence, and proclivities, play in this view is assigned to a romanticised and segregated world of childhood in contrast to work which is associated with the ‘real’ world of adulthood. This has particular consequences for understandings of both play and childhood, as well as on people’s lived experiences, not least because viewing play as children’s ‘natural’ activity masks the way that play varies across different contexts and dominant ideas shape what is considered ‘natural’ (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010).

¹⁵ This age based categorisation is complicated, however, in relation to early childhood as the Committee of the Rights of the Child (2005) defines early childhood as birth-eight-years-old, whilst in many developmental psychology texts and in the UK educational system children five-eight-years-old are roughly understood to be in middle childhood.

In this regard, Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that the rhetoric of 'play as progress' has achieved a particularly hegemonic status. Here, play is conceptualised as an activity which positively influences children's growth and development in areas as far ranging as literacy and problem-solving; peer relations; and self-fulfilment. Sutton-Smith (1997) is sceptical of such causal claims made on behalf of play for a series of methodological and ontological reasons. Most importantly for this study, he points out that in the progress rhetoric – largely dominated by the academic disciplines of psychology and education as well as their popular offshoots – play often becomes conflated with childhood and indeed is viewed as a preeminent mode of learning for children. Without dismissing these claims entirely, Sutton-Smith (1997) points out that such adult responses to children's play risk becoming instrumentalised or end-oriented – concerned with the future adult pedagogies of play will produce. Play that does not fit into a progress narrative – including much death/violence play which is considered irrational, disjointed, or 'dirty' – may be ignored, marginalised, or there may even be attempts to restrain it given that such theories 'provide rationalization for the adult control of children's play' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.49). In associating play with childhood and assuming that play is 'easy, fun and therefore not rational, sensible or real', children's activity and play itself can end up being dismissed as frivolous and, as a consequence, trivialised (Ailwood, 2003, p.292). Such a move also disassociates child and adult play: as Sutton-Smith (1997, p.47) comments, 'Presumably adults have already grown up, so the supposed growth virtues of play are irrelevant.' This reinforces naturalised distinctions between children as 'human becomings' and adults as 'human beings' based on linear progress narratives, producing limited conceptualisations of play given that they do not take into account the wide variability which constitutes ludic activity.

Indeed, it is precisely this diversity of play forms, narratives, and players that Sutton-Smith (1997, p.2) points to in theorising the fundamentally ambiguous nature of play which involves:

1. the ambiguity of reference (is that a pretend gun sound, or are you choking?);
2. the ambiguity of the referent (is that an object or a toy?);
3. the ambiguity of intent (do you mean it, or is it pretend?);
4. the ambiguity of sense (is this serious, or is it nonsense?);
5. the ambiguity of transition (you said you were only playing);
6. the ambiguity of contradiction (a man playing at being a woman);

7. the ambiguity of meaning (is it play or playfighting?)

Other theorists describe this ambiguity in terms of the 'paradoxes' of play. Bateson (1973, p.153), for instance, emphasises that while actions in play refer to actions in the everyday world, they do not carry the same meaning: in his well-known example, 'The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.' Vygotsky (1978) identified another paradox as the tension between freedom and the rule-bound nature of play. Players, he contends, are intrinsically motivated and able to do what they want in play; yet, they are constrained by the meanings and rules of behaviour within the play. He described this as having to subordinate personal desires to achieve 'maximum pleasure' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.99), providing the example that if a candy is considered poisonous in play, a player must subordinate any desire s/he has to eat it in order for the play to be most absorbing.

The ambiguity of play is amplified, Sutton-Smith (1997) argues, at least in part by the particularised uptake of play in different disciplinary fields with their own ontological and epistemological commitments. In bringing different disciplinary rhetorics about play into productive dialogue, he puts forward six presuppositions for a more 'universal' definition of play. First, he argues that play must be conceptualised in a broad way which takes into account all its diverse forms including those which involve participation on the continuum from active to passive. Second, play needs to be viewed as an enterprise of all humans as well as animals. Third, definitions of play need to take into account cultural and historical diversity in play, in other words there is a need to move beyond dominant romanticised Western conceptions of play as necessarily voluntary, pleasurable, and removed from wider social structures. Fourth, play is not only attitude towards an activity, but 'is always characterised by its own distinct performances and stylizations' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.219). Here, he points towards the way play is made recognisable as play through specific language, facial expressions, and movements, as well as recurring events and rules. Crucially, such enactments maintain what are essentially 'fragile' play spaces (Corsaro, 1985; Henricks, 2006). Fifth, play varies temporally, from momentary to extended and recurrent forms, and spatially, from scattered and uncertain to highly formalised settings. Finally, play can be understood as a form of expression and communication.

Understanding play as a form of expression, engagement, or 'a quality of relationship that people have with one another and with the conditions of their lives' occupies much of Henricks' (2006, p.182) sociological conceptualisation of play. While Sutton-Smith (1997) would likely be critical of Henricks' (2006) emphasis on humanity, this focus is consistent with the discipline of sociology and indeed appropriate for the subject of this

study, if potentially limiting for understandings of play more broadly. Henricks (2006) argues that play, and a playful orientation, can be distinguished from other forms of human activity in two primary ways. First, play is characterised by 'transformative' forms of action. Henricks (2006, p.185) puts this in the following manner: 'To play is to take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently to build it anew' or, in less romanticised terms, 'To play is to interrupt the flow of events, to seize themes from those and other settings, and to apprehend these themes in distinctive ways.' In this way, he argues, play is similar to human labour where people, in broadly Marxist terms, *transform* the world and indeed their selves in the process of provisioning for and sustaining their communities.

Unlike labour, however, Henricks (2006) argues that play's second defining characteristic is that it is 'consummatory'. This term distinguishes between the location and content of rationales for particular activities. While work is 'instrumental', characterised by transformation of the world for end-products which are required or destined beyond the labour process itself, play is consummatory as it is characterised by a degree of separation from the 'mundane' or everyday life with players motivated by a desire for emotional and intellectual satisfaction or 'completion' *within* rather than beyond the play event. Here, Henricks (2006) follows Huizinga in arguing that play is neither driven by external purposes nor does it produce significant external consequences unless involved in other forms of activity such as work or ritual – points which will be problematised below in clarifying the way play will be taken up in this study.

As a form of interaction, or indeed a way of 'organising collective behaviour' (Sutton-Smith, 1979, p.296), play is both uncertain and 'contestive'. The term 'contestive' is not indicative of a necessarily competitive or antagonistic engagement, but references the dialogic back and forth between a player and the world characterised by a particular 'spirit' of satisfaction and even pleasure. As Henricks (2006, p.201) points out, play is only possible if someone or something 'responds in satisfying ways'. A player – in scaling the walls of a witch's lair, pointing a twig-sword at another person, or dropping to the ground in death – makes an assertion into the social and physical world and then must adjust to the unexpected and even startling responses these contestations engender. By way of contrast, Henricks (2006) stresses that ritual is largely predictable and integrative in the sense that people seek to fit themselves into largely stable forms of practice in order to reaffirm their fit in the social order.

In what is fundamentally an agential view of players, Henricks (2006) perhaps over-emphasises play as a voluntary and primarily internally-focused form of engagement,

given the impact of everyday social relations and cultural resources on play. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, play in early childhood settings in the contemporary UK context is often facilitated – in terms of spatial-temporal arrangements, resources, and behavioural directives – by adults in an attempt to produce particular (external) developmental trajectories. Further, one idea which will occupy this thesis is that play events have significant consequences beyond their momentary existence: to suggest otherwise undermines a view of play as ‘engagement with the world’ which Henricks (2006) otherwise puts forward. In seeking to avoid simply conflating play and other activities, however, it is helpful to view Henricks’ (2006) characteristics of play (transformative, consummatory, unpredictable, and contestive) as *relative* rather than *categorical* features, made in a comparison between ludic and other activities where, for instance, work generally involves commitment to more instrumental ends and ritual generally involves higher degrees of explicit compulsion than play. In this sense, then, play – like ritual – may involve some repetitions, which largely occurs at the beginning or end of play moments (Henricks, 2006), but this does not necessarily alter its epistemological characterisation or its ontological experience as play. That being said, the boundaries between ludic and everyday activities are less clearly circumscribed or, phrased differently, are more complexly linked than a categorical typology would suggest. Indeed, given play’s ambiguity, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between play and everyday worlds is highly contentious. Before developing this idea further, it is necessary to address a further defining characteristic of play: the imaginary.

The symbolic nature of play is hinted at in Henricks’ (2006) discussion of the transformative character of play, with its ability to pull apart and rebuild worlds in different ways, as well as Sutton-Smith’s (1997) ambiguity of reference and meaning noted above. For Vygotsky (1978), and indeed other scholars (e.g. see Fromberg, 2002), a key defining feature of play is the presence of imaginative or symbolic substitution. It is in play, Vygotsky (1978) argues, that perception and meaning are first separated; in other words, a player is not constrained by the ‘literal’ meaning of the object s/he perceives. In play, the meanings objects and actions are given in the ludic world are what is important, rather than their meaning(s) in the everyday world. In play, a scarf can become a cape, a snake, a river, or something else entirely. In turn, actions take place in response to meanings or ideas circulating in the ludic realm. Rather than wrapping a scarf around oneself to keep warm, it can be used as: an aid in flying, an enemy to battle, or a river to be forged. Vygotsky (1978, p.99) identified this as one of the central paradoxes of play: acting with ‘alienated meaning in a real situation’. Such symbolic behaviour allows players to engage with the world in the ‘enacted subjunctive’

(Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.29) full of open possibility and an 'as if' or 'what if' attitude (Edmiston, 2008).

The difficulty with Vygotsky's formulation of 'alienated meaning' is that it is based on an assumption that there is an agreed upon and transparent meaning about objects and phenomena in the everyday world, which can then be disassociated in play. Yet, meanings do not always map directly onto reality in the everyday world, making more than one meaning possible and creating 'discursive gaps' (Bernstein, 2000, p.30). This point is not intended as an elision of imaginative and everyday worlds or to suggest that the everyday world is merely a fictional construction, or an endless play of signifiers, a move made in some post-structuralist writing. As suggested in the above discussion of critical realism, the world has an ontological presence which exists beyond any attempt to know or signify it. The clarification then is that in play any meaning is theoretically possible – meanings are potentially endless and entirely contingent – whereas in the everyday world not just any meaning is possible as structural constraints and material affordances inherently set boundaries on what is possible (Sayer, 2000). That being said, in this thesis, I argue that in practice the everyday world does set limits on the ludic.

Returning to the contentious relationship between play and everyday worlds, while Sutton-Smith (1997) distinguishes between the two, he argues that the use of the terms 'real' and 'unreal' are deceptive and often derogatory. This use of terminology implies that play worlds – with their symbolic substitution and imaginary possibilities – are to be considered 'unreal' and indeed pale imitations of the 'real' world. In contrast, the cultural reality of play worlds is substantive and genuine for the players who engage within them (Bates, 2007; Edmiston, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and, as this thesis will demonstrate, has consequences for the everyday world.

In general, the relationship between the realities of play and everyday worlds is put forward in a way that suggests a shuttling between the two. Bateson (1973), for example, suggests actions are either to be interpreted within a 'play frame' or within the everyday world. Within the 'play frame', which is created by meta-communicative efforts of the players, for example through laughter or stylised exhibits such as the 'play face', actions are not to be taken as they would in the everyday world: again, the playful nip denotes, but is not, a bite. A 'play frame' is broken when actions are interpreted from outside this frame. Sutton-Smith's (1997) notion of 'referential dialectics' offers a similar either-or view of play and everyday worlds, albeit with a greater stress on the necessary interaction between the two. 'Referential dialectics' refers to the level of meta-action, where every action in the play ('virtual') world

references an action in the everyday ('mundane') world through imitation, commentary, or ironic performance. Sutton-Smith (1997, p.196) explains their interaction in the following manner: 'There is the mundane and there is the virtual (as thesis and antithesis) and there is a synthesis in the ongoing play transformations that this duality then produces'.

Whilst these points make it clear that there is a relationship between play and everyday worlds, I will go on to argue in Chapter 6 for a view of play and the everyday as existing in a simultaneous, both-and relationship rather than the either-or relationship which results from a more firmly bounded view of the ludic whether in the shape of play frames or referential dialectics. It is perhaps Henricks (2006, p.218) who provides the most similar perspective, arguing that play is a 'tension-filled space' where play and everyday worlds are necessarily concurrent:

In play people are connected to interesting social themes and processes at the same time that they are disconnected from them. Players are both themselves and not themselves, inside society and outside its boundaries at the same time.

He explains that play provides the possibility for players to operate outside of or disconnected from conventional meanings, assumptions, and structures at least theoretically as I have noted above: for instance children can play at powerful characters exercising extreme influence over others; boys can play at being mothers; girls can become dragons or superheroes. At the same time, play worlds are intimately connected to the structures, challenges, and tensions within the social world and indeed it is this intimate relationship which gives play its 'sense of urgency and meaning' rather than being a 'pointless and shallow' activity (Henricks, 2006, p.219).

To this point, I have put forward a view of play as replete with ambiguity; a relatively transformative and consummative activity; and, a form of symbolic, contestive, and unpredictable dialogue with the world. In considering the relationship between play and everyday worlds, at a broad level this thesis will examine the relationship of play to the socially stratified everyday world; at a more specific level of analysis, it will investigate the social ecology of death/violence play and its relation to social relations in the setting under study.

2.5 The transformational model of social activity

This section will offer a way to begin to tie together the threads of inequality, childhood, and play which have run through this chapter by taking up the question of agency. In paying heed to Prout's (2005, pp.64-65) assertion that: 'The agency of children as

actors is often glossed over, taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans that does not require much explanation,' it will be argued that agency, including in play, and its effects are an open possibility rather than given condition. The transformational model of social activity (TMSA) offered by Bhaskar (1998c; 2011), and exegetically developed by Archer (1998), is the analytic tool which will be put to work here along with a clarification about the relationship between social action and agency.

The TMSA developed within critical realism offers both a critique and a way to address the pitfalls of various other approaches to conceptualising the relationship between people and social formations.¹⁶ Bhaskar (1998c; 2011) groups these approaches in the following manner. Weberian-influenced models stress an individual's independent influence over social formations, which falls into the trap of voluntarism and methodological individualism. Durkheimian-influenced models stress society's coercive influence over the individual, a deterministic reification in that it suggests social formations can exist independently of human activity. A third model is the attempt to synthesise the former models in a dialectic relationship: society produces individuals who in turn produce society. Bhaskar's (1998c) critique of this third model is that it instantiates the problems of both earlier models. Archer (1998) refers to this as a 'central conflation' arguing that it is best exemplified by Giddens's structuration theory.

By way of contrast, Bhaskar (1998c) begins by distinguishing ontologically between people and social formations which, rather than being a conglomeration of people or groups of people, are constituted by relations. Relations in this sense exist between people as well as between people and natural or social objects. These may be direct or indirect, as in the case of a student and the Department for Education. People, in their productive practices, as understood in the broadest of senses, 'work... on (and with)' (Bhaskar, 1998c, p.215) the world and in this process impact 'the conditions of their making' (Bhaskar, 1998c, p.218). However self-reflexive this activity may be, and here he emphasises that much is achieved unconsciously, there are unintentional consequences to actions and these also modify the conditions of future social activity. Structures in social formations, therefore, do not determine actions but set conditions of possibilities for and limits on action. The TMSA, particularly with Archer's developments, also distinguishes temporally between people and social formations. In asserting that 'society is always already made', Bhaskar (1998c, p.214) references the

¹⁶ The term 'social formation' draws its lineage from Althusser who argued that 'society' implies a stable unity which is both impossible and 'deceptive' whilst social formation alludes to spatial-temporal distinctions, dynamisms, and contradictions (Hennessy, 2000, p.234).

way human practices utilise tools and resources, such as language, which pre-exist them.

As a result of these ontological and temporal distinctions, the TMSA is insistent that people do not produce social formations; instead, they modify them in some way:

People do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather, society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism).

(Bhaskar, 1998c, p.216)

Crucially here, the TMSA suggests that whilst social formations are fundamentally dependent on the activity and concepts of people, this dependence is best understood temporally: rather than social formations being constituted by reflexive agents in the present, as a conflationist model suggests, 'the concept-dependence of such structures can only be affirmed in one acceptable way: by reference to the concepts (ideas, beliefs, intentions, the compromises and concessions plus unintended consequences) of the long dead' (Archer, 1998, p.366), in other words people in the past rather than contemporary. Because of this dependence on human activity, however, social formations and structures can only ever be considered relatively enduring and therefore possible to change.

Given the ontological distinction Bhaskar (1998c, p.220) insists on between people and social formations, there is a need for a 'system of mediating concepts' to clarify how the two link and articulate and to this end he introduces the concept of positioned-practices. This refers to the way that people engage in particular practices enabled by the relational positions they enact. As Archer (1998, p.372) points out, the concept of 'position' is most fruitfully understood in general terms as 'the position in which they [people] find themselves' rather than in a more restricted sense of prescribed 'roles'. Because positions – as social relations – pre-exist people, they can also be changed through people's activity (Collier, 1994). On this basis, childhood as a structural form which is part of an inequitable social relation is understood to pre-exist people in the present, yet be reproduced and transformed through positioned-practices of people in their everyday lives through the process of generationing.

Whilst the TMSA offers a generalised understanding of social activity, for the purposes of this thesis two points of elaboration are necessary. Firstly, it is important to reiterate that the TMSA is equally applicable to children as well as adults. Further, play can be

examined as a social activity, and indeed a 'positioned-practice' in many early childhood settings, calling attention to its temporal and spatial conditions of (im)possibility as well as those which it enables. Corsaro (1985; 1997; 2000; 2005; 2009) has developed the concept of 'interpretive reproduction' to highlight children's creative and productive participation in society, in contrast to deterministic perspectives which view children as adults in the making and consign children to internalising existing culture. Interpretive reproduction refers to the process whereby children take ideas and information from the 'adult world', and in the process of answering their own questions and concerns, including in ludic activity, they make these understandings their own (interpretation). As children do so, they not only contribute to cultural productions in their peer cultures, but also to the broader social world; however, this activity is constrained by social structures (reproduction). In working with the concept of interpretive reproduction, Löfdahl and Hägglund (2006) provide an example of the way that children, in their play, are involved in the renewal of inequalities. In their study of a Swedish nursery, they note the way that generational inequalities from the 'adult world' – inscribed by the markers of age and size – were used by older children as a basis for explicitly and implicitly excluding younger children from their ludic activity. In 'doing' generation in this way, however, their practices renewed inequitable social relations including the conflation of age/generation with power and decision-making and age-segregation. Notwithstanding the critiques which can be levelled at the concept of interpretive reproduction, both in terms of its 'conflationist' tendencies and its instantiation of essentialised adult and child 'cultures', the point here is to nod to an important tradition which recognises children's playful activity as contributing to the renewal and transformation of the social order.

Secondly, the relationship between social activity and agency requires clarification. These concepts are largely elided within the TMSA, however in this study I will be maintaining a distinction following Mayall (2002, p.21):

Children are social actors; that is, they take part in family relationships from the word go; they express their wishes, demonstrate strong attachments, jealousy and delight, seek justice...The term *agent* suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints.

Rather than assuming agency, as Prout (2005) and Honig (2011) warn against, an important question to ask is: To what extent is social action able to influence and transform, rather than reproduce, those structures which create the conditions of (im)possibility for people's lives? Agency, the possibility of making a difference, as

Alanen (2001, p.11) points out, is 'linked to the "powers" (or lack of them) of those positioned as children, to influence, organise, coordinate and control events taking place in their everyday worlds'. In this sense, agency is perhaps best understood as a relation – between people, social structures, as well as things and spaces such as the different possibilities for agency afforded by the home, educational institution, or street – rather than an individual attribute or possession (Oswell, 2013).

Given generational inequalities, Qvortrup (1999) is pessimistic about moves to attribute agency to children in relation to changes in childhood over time and place, arguing that such alterations have not generally been the result of children's actions. Others, while not denying the effects of enduring dominations, are more hopeful about the possibility for children's agency in relation to social transformation. Oswell (2009, p.16), for instance, makes the point that infant 'soundings' are generally not constituted as agential in the sense of effecting transformations, but he makes a radical call for listening to the sound of an 'infant politics'. 'In order for voices to become political speech and in order for political communities to form around those voices,' argues Oswell (2009, p.14), 'there need to be spaces in which those voices can be not simply articulated but also sounded in an environment in which they might be heard and listened.' The suggestion here is that transformative agency is in part dependent on the relations into which such 'voices' are entered; rather than using limited language to deny children political agency, Oswell (2009) argues the realm of political expression should be opened beyond rational speech.

Oswell's (2013) arguments can be understood in relation to moves within childhood studies to widen conceptualisations of the political, to include but also exceed the State and its formal structures and procedures of governance (e.g. Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Kallio, 2008; Kraftl, 2013; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; Skelton, 2010). These include efforts to reconstitute the political both in terms of its potential agents and possible spaces: 'If capitalism roosts in the routine,' proposes Katz (2004, p.22), 'so do the possibilities for its disruption.' Rose (1999, p.280) puts this clearly in describing what he refers to as 'minor politics', in reference to Deleuze, but what has also been termed 'lower case' politics:

They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasised future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental. They frequently arise in 'cramped spaces' – within a set of relations that are intolerable, where movement is impossible, where change is blocked and voice is strangulated. And, in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action.

This formulation allows consideration of preschools as sites shaped by politics with children's acts in such sites potential forms of political expressivity, unlike more traditional notions in which 'nothing that children do can be considered political' (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012, p.790).

The difficulty with finding the political in everything, however, is that what is constituted as the political can become so broad that domination and exploitative relations may consequently be 'radically depoliticized', Mitchell and Elwood (2012, p.790) argue. Over-extending the political in such a way can result in 'the socioeconomic conditions of power in which these politics play out' being subsumed within individuals in the form of affect, performativity, and virtually any act of transgression (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012, p.790). These concerns have a particular resonance with very young children, as relative newcomers to the social world generally and educational settings specifically; here it can be difficult to disentangle acts of transgression which relate to the process of learning – and in the process contravening – conventions and those which 'seek to engender a small reworking'.

It is not necessary, however, for recognition of 'minor politics' and transgressive acts to dislocate all other forms of political action and agency. As Rose (1999, p.280) points out:

...the feminist politics that was conducted under the slogan of the 'personal is political' is the most obvious example from our recent past of the ways in which such a molecular and minor engagement with cramped space can connect up with a whole series of other circuits and cause them to fluctuate, waver and reconfigure in wholly unexpected ways.

In seeking to both broaden what is constituted as the political field as well as maintain the specificity of political agency, Katz (2004) offers a helpful analytic differentiation. Acts of resilience, she suggests are those which enable people to cope with those cramped spaces in which they live their lives, including through acts of transgression. Acts of reworking have the added dimension of recognising conditions of inequality and offering ways to mediate them whilst acts of resistance are those enacted deliberately and intentionally to 'subvert, or disrupt these conditions of exploitation and oppression' (Katz, 2004, p.242). Political resistance, in this formulation, involves disidentification and 'a vision of what else could be' (Katz, 2004, p.253) (see Chapters 7 and 9 for a development of these ideas). Notably here, acts of resilience and reworking can create the space for resistance and vice versa. Similar to Rose (1999), then, Katz (2004, p.256) is pointing to the way 'minor' acts can be understood in political terms, and even moved, from 'subversion to transformation'. As

such, the notion of 'the political' taken up in this thesis is a wide one, best understood in reference to the production of life and related struggles for hegemony at all scales: contestations over meanings and practices ranging from the mundane everyday to those of production and distribution, social relations, and personhood.

2.6 Implications of the conceptual frame

In drawing this chapter to a close, it is perhaps helpful to indicate some of the key implications arising from this discussion for the thesis as a whole. If the literature I am characterising as broadly materialist feminist emphasises anything most persuasively, it is the need to interrogate the relationship between banal, micro-level practices – inclusive of behaviours, language, ideologies, and even personhood – and the political-economy of capitalism. Everyday practices are often explained with reference to norms or conventions, coupled with the potential for negative repercussions. Whilst norms are important in understanding people's practices, they are insufficient for understanding how norms articulate with broader social relations (Smith, 1988) and why they become dominant at particular times and in particular places (Hennessy, 2000).

The assertion here, which is central to the line of argument and analysis pursued in this thesis, is that micro-level practices cannot be separated from or, in the language of critical realism, are emergent from the political-economy. It is worth restating here that the notion of emergence is non-deterministic. In part this has to do with the way that global structures interact differentially with local beliefs, social practices, and geographical spaces. 'Not all places affected by capital's global ambition are affected the same way,' argues Katz (2001, p.1229), 'and not all issues matter equally everywhere.' What's more, the point here is that the political-economy with its various social relations cannot continue to exist without the actions of people in the present. It is in even the most mundane of everyday practices that social relations of capitalism, and indeed generational relations, are reaffirmed, reproduced, and potentially transformed. Notably, this argument holds true for children's everyday practices which, perhaps more than any others, are often viewed as private or pre-social matters (Thorne, 1987).

To illustrate these points, Smith (1988) provides the example of walking her dog, noting that she allowed her dog to defecate on lawns of people who rent, not those who own. This seemingly benign moment of interaction with her dog, she argues, is infused by the political-economy including zoning bylaws and the cost of real estate which affect the relative rental-ownership compositions in the neighbourhood, as well as the existence of private property in a capitalist economy. Indeed, in 'observing the niceties

of different forms of property ownership' Smith (1988, p.155) effectively reproduced classed social relations.

Interrogating everyday practices in relation to the political-economy, as well as socio-cultural norms and values, is important at a number of levels. Analytically, ignoring the political-economy can serve to naturalise capitalist social relations, diminishing the possibilities for knowledge production. Consideration of the specific and local manifestations of capitalism – including in relation to children's everyday practices – provides a better understanding of both political-economy and socio-cultural process. Politically, and here I reference a radical politics concerned with social transformation, such interrogation is essential: 'Global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities,' argues Mohanty (2003, p.509), 'Thus they need to be demystified, reexamined, and theorized.' In conclusion, the reproduction and agential transformation of generational and other, often inequitable, social relations will occupy a central place in this thesis, primarily through consideration of participants' everyday engagements with death/violence play.

CHAPTER 3:

Methodological framework: data generation and analysis

The previous chapters have outlined the genesis and focus of this study. They have developed the conceptual framing of the 'object' under study in relation to epistemological and ontological questions about inequalities, childhood, and play. This chapter moves on to outline the methodological framework, tackling questions of 'voice', values, and ethics. The critical ethnographic approach taken in the study, alongside the methods used for data generation and analysis, are described and concretised.

3.1 Social justice and studies of childhood

In response to a growing acceptance of the social and situated nature of knowledge production, there has been a move within the social studies of childhood to recognise children as experts in their own lives, with the ability to contribute to an understanding of what life is like from their particular perspective and social location (Clark, 2005; Kellett, 2005; Mayall, 2002), in part given the changing nature of childhood. Indeed, the argument made in much critical research (e.g. see Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Harding, 2004), which this thesis maintains, is that the absence of marginalised groups in research – including children – can misrepresent the social world by inaccurately universalising claims about it (Sayer, 2000). Also noteworthy in the social studies of childhood is the contention that children, even the very young, can be considered as capable research participants. This represents a paradigmatic shift from viewing children as objects to be studied to children as participating subjects with the competence to be involved in describing and interpreting their own experiences (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). This is not to argue for a static view of competence or one that exists in opposition to interdependence with others but for an understanding that children as well adults have diverse, changing, and developing capabilities and these are always practised in relation with others (Kjorholt, Moss and Clark, 2005).

Researching marginalised perspectives has often been framed under the rubric of 'voice', which has received sustained interrogation in the general research methods literature (e.g. see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009), but has particular salience in relation to research with children. As James (2007, p.261) points out: 'Within the cultural scripts of Western societies, it is as if in the words that children speak lie encapsulated the

innocence and authenticity of the human condition, fast being lost to the adult world.’ Whilst this thesis will take children’s historically-situated perspectives and experiences as central, the notions of ‘expertise’ and ‘children’s perspectives’ are problematic, intimating as they do a self-coherence, awareness, authenticity, and individualism which cannot be maintained. Children are a part of the larger social world, their perspectives and actions situated and affected by other people’s views (Kjorholt, Moss and Clark, 2005). In other words, knowledge of experiences is not unmediated or reflective of ‘a private reserve of meaning’ (Alldred, 1998, p.155), nor is it necessarily more ‘correct’ than another’s perspective. As I will go on to discuss in more detail below, participation in research is an interactive event produced in dialogue with the people and contexts in which it takes place. Further, research on children’s perspectives cannot take for granted a comprehensive self-knowledge amongst participants. This is not to re-instantiate a divide between adult and child participants in terms of competence and developmental assumptions of increasing self-awareness but to highlight the impossibility of ever knowing with any degree of certitude the vast array of motivations and compulsions for our own actions and interpretations. Finally, the notion of research seeking ‘children’s perspectives’ runs the risk of homogenising children as a group and indeed imposing a coherence on a so-called ‘children’s perspective’.

In making these points, I am not claiming, alongside Alldred (1998, p.151), that ethnographic research on children’s cultures is merely a ‘pseudo-colonialist’ enterprise which makes the impossible claims of representing a cultural world that exists beyond the researcher’s presence or being able to step outside of ‘adult’ interpretations. In contrast, as Sayer (2000) points out, while the production of knowledge is entirely social, the position from which we think and act is not a ‘prison’: we can and do have some level of shared understanding with others and knowledge is not de facto untrue because of its social origins. Whilst ‘voice’ and ‘perspective’ require problematisation, and need to be contextualised in relation to the (relatively enduring) social structures which inform their conditions of possibility, this does not negate the value of investigating and hearing about children’s lived experiences. Here I concur with Mayall (2002) that children have something unique to tell about their lived experiences as members of a shared generational position – albeit that these experiences, interpretations, and indeed generational positions are fundamentally social in nature – and accordingly can help to enhance theorisations of social orders. Investigations of ‘children’s perspectives’ do, however, require a move away from *a priori* assumptions of the ‘truth’ of an individual account. This suggests that research into people’s perspectives can also provide insights into the discursive and material conditions of

data generation, including relations of power and inequality, as well as the values which inform analysis and representation (James, 2007). It is these points I attempt to work with reflexively and explicitly throughout this thesis.

As has already been intimated, questions about perspective and the production of knowledge link to broader issues; indeed, research concerned with the perspectives and experiences of marginalised groups is often motivated by explicitly 'critical' and social justice concerns. Concerns with social justice in research work primarily at two levels: consideration of the relationships between researcher and the researched which I will discuss in section 3.2.2 and the overall goals and motivations for the research itself. Without concurring with all suppositions of the broad range of research 'schools' – from 'neo-Marxists' to Derridian deconstructionists – included in their description of 'critical' research, this thesis works within the broad definition Kincheloe and McLaren (2005, p.305) offer:

Whereas traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, critical researchers often regard their work as a first step towards forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself.

Whilst recognising the limited nature of any single piece of research or individual researcher's practices, this thesis is preoccupied with a desire to have positive – even transformative – impacts on the contexts and lives of marginalised participants (following Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997a; Skeggs, 2007), albeit that these motivations operate at quite a broad level in relation to the research field. Here I am concerned with the conditions under which inequalities are maintained within ludic activity, but also through the interaction of play and everyday worlds, and the implications of this study for critical pedagogies and radical political projects (See Chapter 9), asking not just 'what is' but 'what could be' (Thomas, 1993, p.4).

Critical, emancipatory research has been critiqued for its tendency to move the researcher away from seeking 'undistorted' knowledge towards collecting, selecting, analysing, and sharing data that meets the researcher's political agenda (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). While bias in the collection and analysis of data is certainly a concern, all research has values embedded within it; critical research acknowledges this and makes its own position explicit, thus avoiding what Haraway (2004, p.91) calls the 'god-trick' of assuming the possibility of a neutral and uninvolved researcher. Concurring, Griffiths (1998) critiques empiricist and positivist-oriented research which suggest it is possible for knowledge to be value-free. Knowledge is always laden with both the commitments and political position of the researcher, which are merely

masked if left unacknowledged. As a result, she argues that explicitly stating and holding open values for reflexive consideration actually improves research.

3.2 An ethnographic approach

In the previous section, I indicated that this thesis considers as central children's social practices and experiences, death/violence play in the case of this study. As a research approach, ethnography emphasises intensive study of people and process in everyday contexts over a period of time, seeking to gain detailed insights into a particular setting or group and their perspectives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In total, this ethnography spanned over a year and a half period from January 2011 – July 2012; although, the period from January – April 2011 was largely occupied with the process of access, relationship building, and achieving formal consent.

Conducted from 'inside' a setting, ethnographic approaches suggest that our practices and the meanings given to them – as well as to symbols, phenomena, and relationships – are based on the particular contexts in which we act and interact. In this way, a theoretical commitment to children's perspectives is addressed methodologically by seeking to gain an understanding of insiders' perspectives on contexts and practices. Most generally conceived of in ethnography as some form of participant observation, an 'insider' role is considered important in attempts to gain intimate knowledge of children's (as well as adults') various understandings and practices which are otherwise, literally and metaphorically, hidden in the secret corners of early childhood settings as is the case of much death/violence play (Corsaro, 2000; Holland, 2003; Jordan, 1995; Levin, 2003; Paley, 1984). Paradoxically, as Youdell (2006) points out, close involvement in participants' activity involves positioning oneself in a way that makes the researcher 'familiar' to the research participants at the same time as working to maintain the familiar as 'strange' as a research strategy. These points notwithstanding, the notion of 'insider' perspectives has been thoroughly problematised in the research literature (Abell *et al.*, 2006; Albon and Rosen, 2014; Coffey, 1999) given the highly permeable boundaries of groups or settings; the diversity of experience, social positions, and concomitant multiple and even contradictory perspectives amongst 'insiders'; and the shifting and situational aspects of 'insider' status.

Ethnography's genesis within different disciplines has resulted in a diversity of elucidations; overall, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest a common feature is in-depth study of a single or small number of cases. Prominence is given to generating 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, p.6) of practices, symbols, processes, and contexts in

these specific settings rather than focusing on choosing representative cases for comparison or statistical generalisation. Ethnography can help to ‘shake our assumptions about the parameters of human life, or challenge our stereotypes’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.161), in the case of this study particularly assumptions about childhood. The claims that can be made on the basis of ethnography, however, are not confined to the local or specific setting in which research takes place (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007): developing conceptual insights and explanations about specific phenomena or relationships, supported by detailed and contextualised description, have the potential for *theoretical* generalisation beyond the particular field of study (Robson, 2002). In this sense, ethnography allows for the consideration of both the limitations and possibilities of existing conceptualisations, as well as potential development of theories related to complex social processes.

3.2.1 Selecting the setting

For the purposes of this ethnographic study, I made the decision to focus on a single early childhood setting in which to investigate death/violence play. This decision was not based on an assumption that death/violence play only happens in early childhood or in institutional settings – indeed folklore research suggests the prevalence of such play in informal neighbourhood settings, historically at least (Sutton-Smith, Gerstmyer and Meckley, 1988). Instead, the decision was motivated by both my own interests as an early childhood educator and pragmatic considerations related to accessing groups of children as research participants. The decision to focus on a single setting was based on a commitment to detailed analysis of both relationships and processes, where time and immersion feature as facilitating factors particularly in relation to activity which happens on the peripheries. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, however, the choice of an early childhood setting created a particular context for the play interactions which form the object of this study.

The process of selecting a setting was largely pragmatic: being new to London, I relied on support from one of my supervisors and her student – an Early Years Advisory Teacher in a West London borough who had contacts with a number of early childhood settings. Through email, I was able to establish contact with two settings to organise visits. I spent one afternoon observing at each setting and discussing my thesis with the Head of Centre. I had a short list of requirements that I was looking for in a setting. Most importantly, I focused on finding a setting that ostensibly permitted death/violence play. Selecting a setting which did not even formally accept death/violence play would

likely have created conflicts with setting staff as I planned to research as a semi-participant observer. I also expected that children would have also been less likely to discuss their death/violence play if it was explicitly forbidden.

Secondly, I hoped to find a setting that included a majority of children from working class families as much of the existing research on death/violence play has focused on predominantly middle-class children (for example Edmiston, 2008; Galbraith, 2007; Katch, 2001; Paley, 1984). In keeping with my interest in marginalised social groups. I also felt it was important to select a setting that reflected – at least to some degree – the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of London and other metropolitan centres. Although both settings met my basic criteria and both expressed interest in my research, in the end I selected Westside Nursery for the simple reason that during my observation children were involved in long, extended periods of informal activity including imaginative death/violence play, often without direct educator involvement. By way of contrast, activities in the other setting – including imaginative play – seemed to be predominantly organised and facilitated by adults. My preference for Westside Nursery on this basis was in no way a critique of the pedagogical practices in either setting, but reflective of my research interest in children's interactions with other children and outside of explicitly pedagogically-oriented activities. In the next chapter, I will describe Westside Nursery in substantially more detail, situating the setting within broader sociospatial relations.

3.2.2 Participant observation, power, and generational inequalities

Critical ethnographies often have a shared interest in considering the relations of power which affect whose accounts are heard and whose are silenced, as well as questions of interpretive and textual authority. In the case of research with children, this is compounded and complicated by generational inequality (Connolly, 2008; Walkerdine, 1990). Inequalities impact on research both in methodological and ethical terms, for instance generational inequalities often mean that children feel compelled to give adults a 'correct' answer (Clark, 2005).

According to Alderson (2008), conducting research with, rather than on, children is fundamentally an issue of respect and a more equitable control of the research process. Research with children as co-researchers in particular, she argues, represents a shift in relations of power between researcher and participants. Indeed involving children as research collaborators was my original intention; however, I soon came to realise that such an approach would not necessarily address power

imbalances as the research topic, questions, and project reflected my preoccupations – rather than those emerging from people in the setting – and children’s involvement would not have meant that I would relinquish textual authority as ultimately this was a study for my PhD. Further, as James (2007) points out, children’s participation as co-researchers does not necessarily resolve power imbalances between children. More humbly, it would be simplistic to suggest that turning over research activity to children in one study could, on its own, counter inequitable social relations.

These caveats do not negate efforts to question and shift inequitable social relations in critical research, both in terms of the research process and products. Without such efforts, inequalities will merely be maintained, if not deepened. To this end, Emond (2005, p.125) suggests developing ways of being with children informants which acknowledge and support their right to control ‘the extent to which the researcher is allowed in’. Mandell (1991) has offered the ‘least adult’ position as a way of engaging in research that seeks to minimise power relations between adults and children. She conceptualises this role as one which involves suspension of ‘adult-like characteristics except physical size’ (Mandell, 1991, p.40) including ‘authority, verbal competency, cognitive and social mastery’ (Mandell, 1991, p.42). The ‘least-adult’ role, however, is patronising in its assumption that children can be convinced to dispense with their complex understandings of the social and indeed that children – as opposed to adults – are inherently incompetent or lacking in mastery. It is based on the inaccurate assumption that it is possible to ‘dilute’ or ‘diffuse’ generational inequalities just by the way a researcher behaves (Mayall, 2008, p.110).

By way of contrast, I viewed my position as a ‘least-educator’ role. Here, I attempted to present myself as operating outside of the institutionalised responsibilities and authority embedded in an educator role. Whilst the educators at Westside Nursery had more complex understandings of their roles and certainly a commitment to the children and families they worked with, policy imperatives regarding health and safety; observation and assessment; and school readiness created a context in which a high degree of regulation and surveillance of children’s lives was paramount (See Chapter 4 and 5 for further discussion). Practically speaking, in considering myself a ‘least-educator’, I refrained from enforcing setting rules, leading routines or transition times, or facilitating any educational activities. I also increasingly came to distinguish my interactions with children as being unmotivated by pedagogical intentions. Instead, I joined children – when invited – in activities that they were involved in including chatting; building with blocks; climbing and running; and imaginative play. Contra the ‘least-adult’ role, however, I did not attempt to deny my own ‘adulthood’, skills, and (in)competencies and

I have continued to take up Mayall's (2008) call to reflect upon the way that generational relations affected my interactions and analysis throughout this thesis. Ultimately, however, this 'least-educator' role was merely a starting point and could not begin to offer prefabricated answers for the complex, day-to-day interactions that I was involved in during the course of the research process nor would I want it to, points which I have written about in detail elsewhere (Albon and Rosen, 2014).

3.3 Ethics and answerability

Dominant forms of (neo)liberal thought tend to reduce ethics to a 'set of principles which are universalizable, impartial, concerned with describing what is right' (Tronto, 1993, p.27). Ethical action becomes a question of how closely and efficiently individuals – understood as autonomous, rational, and motivated by self-interest – follow these abstract and formal rules. Such imperatives, Dennis (2009) notes, form the basis of much of the discussion of ethics in research texts, where ethical practice is generally condensed into a series of technical prescriptions understood to avoid risk or minimise harm. The pragmatic presentation of a checklist of ethical responsibilities, such as the use of a consent letter, can offer a sense of reassuring certainty that a researcher's ethical obligations are being met. This, however, can overshadow the complex moral and political concerns from which such prescriptions arise and is singularly inadequate for addressing 'complicated dilemmas' (Dennis, 2009, p.132) and 'grey areas' (Burgess, 1989, p.61) in the research process that necessitate difficult political-ethical decisions.

From a Bakhtinian (1990; 1993) perspective¹⁷, to rely purely on abstract ethical guidelines is tantamount to relying on an 'alibi' abdicating responsibility for one's actions. In response to technicism and in keeping with the emancipatory commitments of this thesis, ethics herein are framed within a Bakhtinian notion of 'answerability': continuous and committed attempts to respond to others (such as participants in this study) about their desires, explanations, and experiences. Understood in political-ethical terms, this involves being answerable not just to individuals but to subordinated social groups and even more pointedly 'answerable to the *question of justice*' (Readings, 1996, p.154). In this sense, widely recognised ethical values concerned with minimising harm, producing beneficial outcomes, as well as respect and equality, are not understood solely in terms of ethical obligations to individual participants, an

¹⁷ The Bakhtinian circle was a group of scientists, artists, and philosophers – including Valentin Vološinov – who gravitated around Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) in the years following the Russian revolution.

interpretation rooted in Western liberal individualism (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007), but take into account commitments to marginalised collectivities.

Two points of elaboration are necessary in explicating Bakhtinian answerability. First, answerability implies bringing to others both meaning, in the sense of the meaning(s) embedded in my own understandings, and value, in the sense that an 'interested-effected attitude' (Bakhtin, 1993, p.32) recognises the worth of others' attempts to act and speak in the world. This is not a relativist wandering which gives no room for evaluation for answerability involves bringing one's 'outsidedness' or 'excess of seeing' to another. This might mean caring to observe those who are silenced or whose ways of being are otherwise marginalised in a research setting. Crucially, for Bakhtin (1990, p.25), this is not a colonial enterprise to impose sameness or arrogantly assume that we can fully know another, instead: 'The excess of my seeing must "fill in" the horizon of the other human being who is being contemplated, must render his horizon complete, without at the same time forfeiting his distinctiveness'. Understood as a relational process, answerability implies that all are changed in the process. In relation to research, answerability can refer to ethical sensibilities guiding on-going interactions between the researcher and the researched; it can also refer to the more diachronic process of data interpretation and representation. As Tobin and Kurban (2009, p.28) eloquently comment: 'To answer means to listen carefully and then reply, as best we can, even when we fear we have not fully understood what was said to us and even when we know that our reply is inadequate.'

This effort to consider research practice in terms of an ethics of answerability does not, however, negate the more technical and pragmatic requirements for research practice. In keeping with the British Sociological Association (2004) and requirements of the Institute of Education, these practices include commitment to: negotiating informed consent; privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality; and data protection.

3.3.1 Informed consent

Informed consent is increasingly understood as a negotiation, an ongoing accomplishment rather than a finalised achievement, with (potential) participants about their willingness, or not, to participate in research (BSA, 2004; Cocks, 2006). While this implies that consent is a process rather than a product and indeed such a conceptualisation of consent informed my ethnography throughout, this does not negate a commitment to a more formal process of informing participants about a study

including what they can expect and what their rights are as well as the opportunity to decide if and when to participate.

In asking for consent, Cocks (2006, p.253) points out that presentations of research projects generally presuppose a 'mainstream child, who is presumed to have some age-appropriate channel of communication that adults know and understand'; the process is far more complex, however. Specifically, the question has been raised as to the extent to which young children who have limited life experiences, and indeed any novice research participant, understand the implications of participating in research, particularly that which will be published (Cocks, 2006; Skanfors, 2009). This is compounded when the researcher and researched do not share fluency in the same language which was the case between myself and many of the children in Westside Nursery. Despite these concerns, I felt it was ethically important to provide all potential participants with the power to 'opt in', at least nominally, as Alderson (2004) advocates in relation to children. Assuming that people would be unable to understand what my research was about seemed presumptuous and arrogant. Instead, I sought ways to explain my research, and its potential effects, in clear and familiar language and images (Alderson, 2005); as well, I strove to be aware and ethically answerable to people through on-going negotiation of consent.

Somewhat ironically, given that this study is premised on a view of children as competent and an interest in children's perspectives on their lived experiences, the first step in the formal process of achieving formal consent was with adults. After receiving approval for this study from the university ethics committee, I sought and received formal written consent from the Head of Westside Nursery as the main 'gatekeeper' to the setting (Appendix 1). She also informed the setting's Board of Governors about the study. My next step was to discuss the study with educators in the setting and request their consent (Appendix 2). In total, 21 educators¹⁸ consented to participate and 1 did not; however, 5 did not agree to be photographed or recorded. Whilst I had some concern over the course of the research that there was some implicit pressure put on educators to consent to participation – if only because of the institutional authority of the Head who strongly supported the project – the decision of some not to provide full consent alleviated these concerns to a certain extent. I did, however, continue to renew consent for all formal interviews.

¹⁸ Whilst 22 educators were asked for consent, for all intents and purposes the group which generally worked with the children in the Nursery (as opposed to other activities offered as part of the broader mandate of the children's centre) was smaller. It was primarily this smaller group of 13 educators whom I focused on in the research process.

With the help of the Head, I arranged a number of sessions in order to meet with families to discuss the project and request consent for their child's participation (Appendix 3). Practically and legally, it was important for parents/carers to be aware of the project and indicate their (non-)consent in the 'best interests' of their child prior to my approaching children given potential limitations to children's understanding of the public nature of research data. As a result of these sessions, I realised I needed to simplify my consent form, including removing the request for use of videos beyond the setting. The Head, without whom this thesis would not have been possible, distributed and collected these new consent forms (Appendix 4) for the remaining parents/carers as well as those new families who joined the setting in the Autumn 2011 term. In total, in the Spring 2011 cohort, 42 families consented to their child's participation, 3 did not consent, and 33 did not return consent forms. This low return rate was likely a result of the fact that the Head was less active in collecting the forms; regardless, I did not include data in this thesis for children for whom I did not receive parental consent and I did not engage in any visual research during this period. In the Autumn 2011/Spring 2012 cohort, all families returned forms: 6 families did not consent to their child's participation and 71 did. Of these 71 families, 8 did not give consent for audio or video recording.

Concurrently with the process of requesting consent from families, I began the 'ethnography proper' in the research setting. The Head introduced me to the children as someone interested in finding out about what they play because I was interested in writing and telling people about it. The decision not to inform the potential child-participants of my project in more detail at this point was motivated by a number of factors including the legal factors mentioned above. Methodologically, my previous research experience suggested that some familiarity with a researcher is a key factor in the decision to participate in research (Rosen, 2008), and I felt that allowing the children time to get to know me before asking formally for consent was important.

I continued to experience a tension over this decision, however, feeling that I was not only reproducing, but reinforcing, views of children as less able to consent or worse as unnecessary to consult in relation to consent. These concerns did not dissipate and indeed continue to sit uncomfortably in retrospect (cf Barbour, 2010), but I tried to address them in a number of ways. I determined to destroy my fieldnotes if I did not later receive more formal consent from the participants, a difficult decision but luckily one I did not need to make. Overall, I viewed this as an extended period of 'casing the joint' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.29), just as much a time when the researcher learns about the setting as when the people in a setting learn about the researcher.

In the early days of research, I placed myself near ludic activity, occasionally playing with objects by myself, always waiting until children approached me to initiate interaction (following Corsaro and Molinari, 2008). Once approached, I responded to children on the basis of their interjection. During this period, and indeed after I had requested formal consent, I continued to respond to questions from children about my presence in the setting: I was occasionally asked if I was an educator or had some other purpose in the setting. I responded with a simple explanation of my presence and what children could expect from me. I had anticipated that it would take some time before I was invited to join in ludic activity, but early on, Abdul approached me with a growl. When I responded with a 'shriek of fear', he quickly grabbed me and initiated a narrative which involved defending ourselves from sharks with fire bombs. From that point on, I rarely spent more than five minutes on my own in the setting. During this period, I recorded fieldnotes in a prominent location hoping this would serve as a visible reminder of my status beyond potential play-partner.

That said, there were some children who – although aware of my presence – never initiated or joined me in any activities and others who only did so on rare occasions. I generally took this as a decision to 'opt-out' of my research and did not actively pursue these children. Skanfors (2009) might refer to this as using 'ethical radar'. She uses the term to indicate that consent is not only written or verbal but involves attention to body language, such as physically turning away, and a lack of physical or verbal response. I was aware, however, that I might be misinterpreting lack of initiation of interaction as opting out when it was potentially more a reflection of inequalities in children's experiences: it was generally children who were more verbally articulate in English who approached me. Realising that this would limit my research, and reinforce the invisibility of an already marginalised group, I made sure to place myself near as many children as I could during the course of my research and whenever I spoke about my presence I indicated that I was interested in anyone who wanted to interact with me.

In January 2012, I began meeting with children to formally discuss consent. I met with small groups of 5-10 children during their organised group times at the end of sessions. Using a pamphlet with images (Appendix 5), I briefly discussed the project as an opportunity for me to learn more about what they play, who they play with, and how different children play together. I also explained that I wanted to interview anyone who was interested as well as record their play (with video) so that we could look at it together to discuss. Two further points that I emphasised were that I would be writing and telling other people – whom they didn't know – about what they play, do, and say and if anyone ever did not want to engage with me they could just say so. With such a

brief description of the project I attempted to balance provision of sufficient information with Dockett and Perry's (2007, p.55) point that 'too much information can be as confusing as too little' and of the difficulties of alerting participants to *all* 'possible positive and negative outcomes of research participation'. I encouraged the children to ask me questions at that time and continued to answer questions – often provoked when children saw me with my notebook or video camera – more informally during my time in the setting.

3.3.2 Privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality

Participants' right to confidentiality is an ethical obligation that must be addressed in any study, particularly given the longevity and potentially wide-spread distribution of research findings. This can be addressed through anonymising data: all participant and setting names have been changed and as far as possible identifying features have been omitted from this thesis. My efforts at ensuring privacy within the setting became more complicated in the course of the research, however, given the small size of Westside Nursery where even the removal of identifying features did not stop participants (primarily educators) from guessing who other participants (primarily children) were. My concern here was that sharing pieces of data – in the form of fieldnotes or anecdotal observations – might serve to 'fix' and even pathologise particular children if they became identified with play practices deemed inappropriate. As a result of increasing concerns about such inadvertent effects of my research practice, approximately mid-way through my research I began to make efforts to focus my discussions with educators on general points of analysis rather than observations of individual children. It is my hope that the long time span between the research process and completion of this thesis will in some way supersede the tension that remains with the publication of data involving individual children in this thesis. Given my reflections about fieldnotes, I also determined not to show video footage to any audience other than those individuals who were part of its generation.

3.3.3 Data protection

In keeping with the Data Protection Act (1998), which includes legal requirements about the secure storage of research data in the UK, I kept all of my data on my person or in a locker on days when I was at the research setting. I did not leave any data at the setting when I was not there but stored paper data at home in a locked drawer and digital files – including fieldnotes, audio recordings, and videos – on a password

protected computer. Also following the Data Protection Act, I informed participants about how the data would be used and who would see it.

3.4 Generating data

In ethnography, the main tool of research is the ethnographer herself (Coffey, 1999); this implies that the ethnographer is deeply implicated in the events which occur in the setting under study. The process of ethnography, therefore, can more accurately be regarded as one of 'generating' rather than 'collecting' research data (Mason, 2002). Whilst I am not suggesting that the people and practices of Westside Nursery do not exist independently of my presence, it would also be inaccurate to claim that they were unaffected by it. It is this point which has led to the increasingly widespread view of data generation processes – such as observations and interviews – as a 'context for interactions' (Angrosino, 2005, p.732) between researcher and participant(s) significantly affected by the categories and theories people hold as well as the milieu and situated practices they engender. Beyond recognising the impossibility of evading such impacts, these can form the basis for lines of inquiry and analysis. To this end, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) advocate continued reflexivity about questions such as which perspectives are privileged and which are marginalised with the understanding that new interpretations and issues will open-up in the future.

Ethnography is also characterised by its use of multiple methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) which, as will be detailed below, included observation, ethnographic interviews as well as more formalised (group) interviews with children and adults, and multivocal discussions of videoed moments of death/violence.

3.4.1 Semi-participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and recording data

I conducted observations in a range of ways. At the start of sessions, I observed and took notes from a window in the staff room which overlooked the setting and provided me with access to visual but not auditory data. This was helpful for observing who interacted with whom; as time went on, I became particularly interested in this question as I considered the impact of my presence on the activity in the setting. Notably, children did tend to have relatively stable friendship groups – in other words children would generally seek out the same children to spend time with; however, when I was present in the setting as a play partner these smaller groups would often come together. I also became interested in embodiment and from this vantage I was able to observe the way children navigated their embodied interactions. During group times, I

joined children on the carpet spaces; in these moments, I generally sat behind the group of children taking notes. During two full sessions, I intentionally took on a non-participant role in order to do a time-sample observation in the outdoor space, recording at 10 minute intervals who was interacting with whom, where the activity was taking place, and the type of activity.

The majority of my time, however, was spent in deep engagement with groups of children, a form of 'hanging out' (Lahman, 2008). This approach to research as one of 'being with' as opposed to constantly 'doing' planned (research) activities (following the distinction made by Suissa, 2006) allowed opportunities for more commonplace conversations and interactions and created possibilities for children to, nominally at least, initiate interactions and direct activity. 'Being with' children inevitably involved participation in ludic activity, given the emphasis on play in UK early childhood settings, and indeed my own research interest.

In the early days of my research, I often began the less formally structured points in the day by sitting on the edge of the action observing, intentionally close to children involved in imaginative play rather than other practices such as painting or reading. In these moments, I wanted to convey a sense of openness and availability to join children in play, so I usually did not have a notepad visible as I felt it would indicate otherwise in the observation-rife early years setting. Shortly after starting the research, I began to be greeted excitedly by children either when I looked down on their activity from the staff room or as I walked into the setting. I was often approached with waves, hugs, or shouted greetings calling on me to join in 'scary play' or invitations to join through explanations of the current state of play. Invitations were not always verbal, but included grabbing my hand and pulling me physically into the play or the donning of jackets, as the play I was interested in often, and increasingly, took place in the outdoor space. My interests, or at least the topics of play I was preoccupied with, appeared to be readily deciphered by many of the children. This mode of conducting research inevitably meant that certain children were more centrally involved as 'informants' for my research. The non-participant observational moments described above were one way I sought to broaden and contextualise research interactions. The central point, however, is that this thesis does not seek to represent all the children in the setting nor is this necessary in relation to the type of claims being made (see Section 3.5.1).

Whilst my direct participation was largely determined by others in the cases above, the actual process of negotiating what happened when I was invited to join ludic activity was complex and provoked some deeply challenging moments which have continued to occupy my thoughts. I had originally planned to take a reactive role in interactions,

only stepping in when a child was in physical danger following practices in similar studies (Galbraith, 2007; Keddie, 2001); however, I rapidly realised that such a 'plan' was entirely insufficient. To give just one example of the complications here, evaluating danger is directly linked to perceptions of aggression and physical risk: these are laden with memories of childhood experiences (Connor, 1989) and the context of 'surplus safety' (Wyver *et al.*, 2010) operating in many early childhood settings.

As a result, I found I had to negotiate responses moment-by-moment generally trying to keep in mind questions of: physical safety and competence; the impact my presence had on producing the challenging situation; a sense of being 'answerable' to others; and, a desire to generate data that would help me to address my research questions, not based on the idea that there was a purity of practice which could be observed if I did not intervene but an interest in how participants themselves respond to challenging situations. In some moments then, I did 'intervene' in keeping with my concerns not just for physical safety but for social justice, which can be linked to ethical considerations of collective beneficence (Dennis, 2009). I also hoped to convey that I would not wholeheartedly reproduce participants' perspectives in the thesis, but would approach them critically. In these cases, however, I sought to open up spaces of dialogue rather than re-inscribing inequitable power relations by drawing upon socially imbued adult authority (e.g. see sections 6.2 and 9.2.3).

In order to generate data about the practices which framed children's experiences in Westside Nursery, I observed staff meetings which took place on a daily basis where educators recorded children's activity, and occasionally during my observations, planned future activities. I observed weekly staff meetings chaired by the Head about topics ranging from Health and Safety to workshops on specific aspects of practice such as British Sign Language. I also ate lunch with educators in the staff room providing an opportunity to observe more informal conversations in the setting.

In total, I was at the setting approximately once a week for 1½ years during the days when the setting was open for its regular programme. I did not, for example, attend during Winter or Summer breaks when the setting was open with a much reduced group of children and staff. 33 of these days involved some form of participant observation, an approximate total of 160 hours. On other days, I met with educators and family members for group or individual interviews.

3.4.2 Recording observational data

The majority of my initial recording took the form of rough fieldnotes – little more than ‘scribbles’ with all the omissions and imprecisions this term implies (Jones *et al.*, 2010a) – jotted down between play episodes and during the transition from the less formal activity period which began each session to the highly organised group time. At lunch and at home in the evening, I developed these scribbles – forms of *aide memoires* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) – into more formalised fieldnotes, ranging from around 5-10 single-spaced pages. Whilst observational notes of any sort are shaped by the observer’s interest and gaze (Rolfe, 2001), in the process of writing my own fieldnotes, a particular tension had to do with the nature of memory. Much of the play I observed moved in multiple directions, with co-players taking up various storylines at the same time and then returning to more shared storylines. Remembering these staccato flows as a semi-participant observer, and even recording these when I was not a semi-participant, was challenging. In the process of constructing fieldnotes, I would indeed ‘cleanse’ (Jones *et al.*, 2010a) the observed moments, and – as a recall aid – I am aware that I would often impose a more linear and collective narrative than may have actually existed in each moment: a written account is inevitably exceeded by the complexity of events. The narratives that I ‘remembered’ and recorded were generally those which ultimately became the storylines that groups of children followed for a more sustained period of time.

One of the reasons I decided to record observations with the help of video was to address some of my own limitations in this regard. I hoped that video would allow me to review the multiple narratives (or indeed largely un-narrativised interactions) which took place in the ludic activity. I also felt that video would allow me to continue to revisit embodied practices and verbal interactions in a way that my fieldnotes would not. Finally, I felt that videoed interactions could serve as a prompt for reflective interviews in a way that reading back excerpts of my fieldnotes may not have. During nine of the afternoon sessions, I carried a small hand-held video camera with me. I turned the camera on and off based on: children’s requests and attention to my ‘ethical radar’ (Skanfors, 2009), the relevance of activity in relation to my research topic, and concerns about safety. For instance, I stopped recording in order to help a child who had been pushed back, causing her to bang her head. I reviewed all of the video clips noting the participants and general topics of activity, doing more detailed transcription as necessary for the analysis process, discussed in Section 4.5.

Representing these various forms of observation in the thesis surfaced a tension: the difficulty of writing about the intensity and vividness of the play world as a cultural

reality in a way that neither confused nor minimised the ludic. The following contrasting representations of the same moment exemplify the distinction being pointed to:

- Six children knelt in a circle and pretended to build a fire by miming placement of rectangular pieces and blowing at the spot on the ground. They put a doll on the ground in the spot where they had been imagining the fire. After a short time, they reached towards the doll, bringing their hands to and from their mouths and pretending to chew.
- A group of young dragons began building a pyre of logs. The pyre burst into flames, ignited quickly by the dragons' fiery breath. The burning heat made short work of roasting the small baby which had been suspended above the fire. Once the baby had been sufficiently cooked, the dragons began to tear at the baby's flesh, greedily reaching for the juiciest meat to dine on.

The first example offers a description of the ludic moment through the lens of the everyday. This seemingly neutral presentation misses, and more significantly diminishes, the potencies of the imaginative world. In the second description, the children's imaginative domestication of real objects and phenomena are presented as 'real' and therefore take on a presence beyond the ludic, in this case detrimentally intermingling children with the monstrous. In addressing the insufficiency of both styles of representation and their unintended negative consequences, throughout the thesis ludic moments are described in ways that attempt to bridge the ludic and everyday, for instance through the use of hyphenated character-child names and inclusion of the more emotive aspects of the ludic narratives (See Section 6.1.1 for an instance related to the above examples).

A final point to make is that a distinction is sometimes made between fieldnotes, which record what has been observed, and a field diary, where a researcher records her impressions, feelings, and emerging analysis including theoretical ideas and reflexive commentary. In this study, however, I kept an integrated research journal. I chose to do this in order to maintain the explicit connection between events and my responses. Noting my feelings in response to specific events gave me an opportunity to reflect on how my reactions may have influenced following action and analysis.

3.4.3 (Group) interviews

Given my emphasis on 'being with' others in Westside Nursery, I had a multitude of informal, ethnographic conversations with both children and adults throughout the course of my study. During informal ludic activities with children, at lunch with the educators, or whilst engaging in the tasks required in routine or transitional events such

as clean up time, we spoke about what was happening, why, and people's perspectives on these activities.

With the rapid pace of much of the ludic activity and the highly pressured context of working in early childhood settings, more formal interviews offered an additional, and less hectic, opportunity for research participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, I hoped that conducting more formal interviews would allow participants to engage in a more reflective and 'meta' level process for discussing death/violence play as a helpful complement to the ethnographic interviews. I also felt that engaging participants in a more formal interview process would (re)establish my presence as a researcher, not just a play partner, which I worried may have overshadowed on-going consideration of informed consent for participants as well as for myself (e.g. see Coffey, 1999).

In keeping with the problematisation of children's (or indeed adult's) perspectives, interviews can best be understood as interactive spaces, albeit ones framed primarily by the researcher's agenda:

Rather than viewing interviewing as a strategy to uncover preexisting positions of research subjects, we view interviews as occasions for the co-construction of meaning by our informants with each other as well as with us.
(Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009, p.7)

As a result, in what follows, I will attempt to give an account of both the process and the context of the research interviews undertaken in this study.

3.4.3.1 Interviews with children

I began interviewing children 12 months into the ethnography, in large part because this was the point when the process of gaining formal consent from families had occurred. Although I was actively researching in the setting up until that point, interviews with specific children presented an entirely new level of direct involvement with both me and my research. The extended period before engaging in interviewing – and indeed the loose phasing of three forms of interviews – was also reflective of the iterative nature of ethnography, where research problems become increasingly focused and more concerned with the process of generating interpretations and explanations, beyond description (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This prolonged period before interviews began was also potentially beneficial in terms of establishing a level of trust with interviewees; the generally affirmative response I received from children eager to participate in the interview process confirmed that having a sense of who an interviewer is and what can be expected from this person can help facilitate the

process of establishing rapport. Although, as Stacey (1988) warns, trust is double-edged: participants may disclose more than they intended or even forget that relationships are research-motivated.

Having previously instantiated a distinction between informal ethnographic conversations and interviews, the first point to make about the interviews themselves was that I generally engaged in very loose conversations rather than structured, or even semi-structured, interviews with children. This approach is advocated as a way of allowing children some sense of control over the pace and direction of the interview (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Mayall, 2000) as well as to raise themes that researchers have not thought about. That said, I did frame the interviews more explicitly than any of my other interactions with children in the setting; this involved delineating the setting where interviews took place, video-recording the sessions, and setting the general topic of the interview.

All formal interviews I conducted with children were done at a time and in a room which was not of my choice but suited the staff at Westside Nursery. I concurred with their choice both out of respect – given the intensity of their working conditions I often felt I was just one more of a series of responsibilities they were interested in (to varying degrees) but were forced to juggle – and my pragmatic need to maintain good relations with the staff who were effectively the ‘gatekeepers’ allowing my continued research presence. I held the interviews during ‘group times’ which were held at the end of each session. This inevitably set limits on the interviews as they had to finish by the end of the session when children were either picked up by carers or had to go in for the hot lunch offered to full-day children at Westside Nursery. Although I did offer to end interviews at earlier points if I intuited that the children were no longer interested in participating, this offer was never taken up and in every case I was the one who had to end the interview based on the time constraints in the setting routine.

During group time, most rooms were either used for story groups or community activities – such as English lessons for adults and drop-in childcare. The consistently available space was a small computer room which doubled as a storage space for various equipment and supplies. This was an unusual space for the children to be in: notably, it did not have any ‘child-sized’ furniture or obviously ‘child-oriented’ displays and resources. As a result, for many of the children the room itself required some exploration at least initially and did not have any routine practices to reference for its use; for example, where to sit and what to do were not given in the space, but were largely framed by my requests and responses. I generally asked the children to sit on the carpeted floor on one side of the room and I sat facing them, often forming a semi-

circle. I explicitly placed us in these positions in order to accommodate my video camera which stood perched on a high ledge. Following feminist approaches to visual ethnographic production, I sought to turn the camera onto myself as well as the interviewees in an attempt to challenge its objectifying gaze when only focused on research participants (Pink, 2007) as well as to allow for analysis of the embodied interactions between myself and the children in the course of the interview.

Given the large numbers of children in the setting, I initially prioritised interviews with children who were consistently grouped together for story-time. The group that I began with was the one which included many of the children who I had observed engaging in death/violence play; although, having been involved in death/violence play was not a requirement for participation. Once this group had an opportunity to participate I began to approach the others. The children who chose to be interviewed were almost exclusively those who had engaged with me previously in some other form of activity in the setting; however, after participating in the interviews I found that many of the children became interested in spending more time with me than they had previously and many asked for an opportunity to be interviewed again, suggesting both a desire for the 'special' status accorded to interviewees – who were allowed to leave the routine story groups to participate in an unusual activity in an atypical space – as well as an interest in speaking about their experiences and ideas.

In seeking participants for the initial round of interviews, I restated the purpose of the research and briefly explained how I would use data; I often said something along the lines of, 'I would like to talk to you about what you like to play and who you like to play with. I am going to write about it and tell other people at my school about it. Would anyone like to come and talk with me today?' At each session, I chose one child who had volunteered and gave him/her the opportunity to invite another child to join, as group interviews can feel less intimidating particularly given adult-child power relations (Einarsdóttir, 2007) and having more than one participant can encourage dialogue and new insights by stimulating 'multiple voices' (Veale, 2005, p.269). With one exception, all chose to be accompanied by another child.

In the first type of interview, I focused on discussing who children liked and disliked playing with. I was interested to chart friendship groupings and consider the relationship between children's stated preferences and my observation of their interactions. At this stage in the research, questions of inclusion and exclusion from play episodes seemed relevant in relation to inequalities and I hoped that the interviews might provide some insight into this line of inquiry. During the interviews, I provided the interviewees with photographs of the children in the setting: photographs

can act as triggers for memories and be emotionally evocative (Croghan *et al.*, 2008). I asked the interviewees to place the photographs of children they 'liked to play with' next to a happy face and children they 'did not like to play with' next to a sad face. Whilst I did not want to make any assumptions of what level of verbal expression each child would be willing and able to engage in during an interview, in drawing on literature in creative methods (e.g. Veale, 2005) in research with children I felt this use of visual and spatial expression would allow for the use of 'multiple languages' (Malaguzzi, 1998) of communication. Following Alderson (2004), I was intent on supporting children to participate in ways which recognised their capabilities rather than selecting methods which would reinforce what they do not know or cannot do, and in the process relegating children as a social group to a status of incompetence.

In retrospect, assuming that pictures would necessarily interest children or provide an opportunity to demonstrate competence was likely based on prior expectations of what children find compelling – for example photographs rather than words – and an illusory desire to find the 'right' method (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). As I realised almost immediately during the interviews, rather than provoking reflection and dialogue, the introduction of photographic objects in these particular interviews introduced a competitive element between children as the activity was difficult, if not impossible, to do collaboratively; the initial interviews became task oriented in the sense that children sought to find particular photographs rather than provoking dialogue which was my intention. In the midst of the process, I did support the children – when needed – to determine strategies for engaging with the photographs and I did ask impromptu follow up questions as a way to provoke further discussion, such as what made someone a good person to play with. Despite these caveats, 21 children wanted to take part and these interviews provided a general sense of friendship groupings and children's explanations for these social alignments. Significantly, this first round of interviews highlighted the importance of heeding embodied participation in ethnographic interviews: some children hugged photographs of those they liked playing with and some used spatial organisation to demonstrate relationships, for example placing photographs of their 'best' friends closer to their own image. Photographs, Croghan *et al.* (2008) argue, allow participants to 'show' things which may be otherwise challenging or contentious to verbalise.

The second type of interview I conducted focused on exploring what children enjoyed playing as well as their reflections about different types of play. My approach to these interviews was more flexible as I sought to take into account my analysis of the problematic assumptions I had made in photographic interviews. In this second set of

interviews, I came prepared with a very loose schedule of possible questions (Appendix 6) designed to prompt some meta-reflection about play generally and death/violence play specifically. Here, I included a number of common sense ideas about death/violence play that I was increasingly coming across in conversations with educators, parents, and in the academic literature, which I asked the children to comment on. I also had paper and markers as possible resources, although I only used these in two interviews where I invited participants to draw some of their favourite play characters. Finally, I had images of a variety of characters that I had seen referenced in the children's play, again considering that I would possibly use these as conversation prompts alongside a very loose schedule of possible questions (Appendix 7). In total, 22 children participated in these interviews.

The final type of interviews involved multivocal revisiting of selected moments from my video observations. Although altered for this study, the method was inspired by the work of Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa (2009) in their use of a videoed sequence of a preschool day as a prompt for different groups of early childhood educators, in effect creating a 'conversation' between educators in three countries. The logic of this method is that the video offers an ambiguous 'nonverbal question' to participants, giving them an opportunity to reflect and comment upon their own (or other's) practices and in the process offers researchers an opportunity to reflect upon the discursive and material conditions informing different understandings and responses to the same video footage, as well as insight into the social constitution of the original event. For the purposes of this thesis, I selected a short excerpt from the video clips that I had taken of children's death/violence play. This selection was made primarily on the basis of the potential that I thought a clip had to provoke dialogue, generally choosing those scenes which I thought were more ambiguous or even controversial, as well as potentially able to open up lines of analysis in relation to my research questions. I had to be pragmatic, however, and was forced to reject a few choice excerpts which were of such low quality – due to the *in situ* and informal nature of the recording – that they were practically unwatchable. I planned a loose series of questions (Appendix 8) to ask in relation to each specific video ranging from asking participants to comment generally on what they saw happening in the video to more specific questions about what had prompted particular actions in the play and how they interpreted and felt about particular play actions.

For these video revisiting interviews, I specifically invited the children who were in the video. All the children I invited agreed and in the end I conducted four interviews of this type with a total of nine children. Whilst I had originally planned to view these videos

and indeed fieldnotes with others – including other children, educators, and even family members, I increasingly felt that to do so would violate the relationship I had established with the children involved as well as exceed the limits of what they had consented to or at least what I felt was fair to request. In some cases, a desire for confidentiality was made very explicit; for example, one child specifically requested that I not tell her father about one of her actions in the video. In other cases, I noted implicit requests for confidentiality or indications that children did not want their actions to be exposed to an educator gaze including the use of spaces hidden from view or too small for educators to enter. In light of these experiences showing videos of controversial play moments where confidentiality would not be maintained seemed singularly unethical. As a result of these concerns, I only included children in revisiting videos if they had been involved in their generation based on the assumption that all of those involved – including myself – had ostensibly consented to having our actions viewed by the others present.

Whilst the interviews were clearly framed in terms of time, space, topic, and participation, I attempted to be open to children's verbal and embodied interjections into the process. As indicated above, interview questions were prepared, but were not strictly adhered to, giving children some control over the discussion. Similarly, I did not insist that children remain seated and stationary during interviews and many of the interviews included sequences of children physically performing the points they were making or shifting the conversation into more imaginary engagements. This variability in the interviewing process meant they could not be compared as standardised events. Instead, the interviews provided an opportunity to consider the interactions and productions within particularised contexts of interaction.

For each of the interview videos, I made a complete transcription of the verbal comments with rough transcription of embodied interactions and expressive vocalisations.

3.4.3.2 Interviews with educators

Individual interviews were conducted with educators twice: eight educators were interviewed in July 2011 (Appendix 9) and ten educators were interviewed in July 2012 (Appendix 10). Each of these interviews took place in one of the meeting rooms and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes (in keeping with the 'coverage' given by the head). Following the interviews I immediately typed up the written interview notes (for those educators who did not consent to being recorded), adding clarifications where necessary. For the others, I made complete transcriptions of the verbal comments.

The second form of 'interview' I conducted was less traditional. The Head requested that I present some of my findings at various points during the study. In each case, I presented initial lines of analysis for discussion amongst the group: essentially using my points as stimulation for a group interview and indeed feedback on my analysis to date. I incorporated a series of interview questions into my presentation. In keeping with the concerns of some of the educators, I took notes during these sessions rather than recording them and transcribed and developed these notes immediately following the group interview. I did three such presentations and group interviews: at 10 months, 17 months, and 20 months, after the ethnography 'proper'.

These sessions allowed for dialogue between educators, but unlike the individual interviews where each educator spoke for long periods without need for much prompting, only a small number of the educators spoke up in the group sessions with even fewer making more than a single comment. While not uncommon in group interviews this unequal participation was potentially compounded by the circumstances of the group interview: attendance was required and any comment made by an educator was subject to immediate scrutiny not only by colleagues but by their line manager. Not participating verbally was perhaps an indication of withdrawal of consent. That said, there was wider participation in these sessions than in the regularly scheduled staff meetings held at the same time and the Head commented on the unexpected number of people who stayed a few minutes beyond their scheduled work hours. In the process of analysing the first two group presentations and interviews, I became – painfully and perhaps too slowly – aware of the way required attendance conflicted with the values of research in relation to informed consent and participation in research. As a result, for the final group interview, I agreed with the Head that no staff would be required to come; however, all those staff without other responsibilities chose to attend.

3.4.3.3 The place of families within the study

Whilst I originally hoped to conduct interviews with family members as another contextual input, I soon realised that this would be of limited utility in relation to my research questions about children's interactions in Westside Nursery. As a result, I determined to limit such data generation to group interviews similar to those described for educators. During the initial information sessions I held with family members when seeking consent, I asked a series of general questions about what their child(ren) liked to play, who their child liked to be in play, and how they felt about different types of play. Halfway into the study I presented my findings to a group of 10 interested

parents/carers. As with the educators, I included a series of questions for family members seeking to gain insights into their perspectives and practices on death/violence play and their feedback on my initial analysis (Appendix 11). Here I was concerned to ascertain prevalent discourses about death/violence play, which I believed were helpful as frames for children's activities, as opposed to searching for the roots of individual children's activity in their family life. I took notes during these sessions and immediately following the session transcribed and developed these 'scribbles' into a more complete form.

3.5 Transforming data: The interpretive framework

Ethnography continues to be riddled with questions provoked by the 'crisis of representation'. Emerging within cultural anthropology, the 'crisis' references the way ethnography essentialised or 'Othered' people and cultures, presenting them as stable objects to be observed and represented through the researcher's purportedly neutral, and indeed imperialist, gaze (Marcus, 2007). Along concurrent lines, feminist authors have pointed out the discrepancy between the reciprocity and collaboration emphasised in feminist research process and the researcher's ultimate authorial authority embedded through her/his selection of data, analysis, and interpretation, and dominant voice in the ethnographic text (Stacey, 1988).

There have been a variety of responses to this 'crisis' including actively writing the ethnographer into the account, an effort which often borders on 'confessional' or the use of 'messy' texts interspersing various viewpoints, 'voices', and styles in a move to de-centre textual authority (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.202). Most compelling for this thesis are responses which argue for the *necessity* of interpretation, and by extension representation. This interpretation, however, is understood as fallible; 'strongly reflexive' – in the sense of attention to the impact of 'cuts' made around the object of study and sense that the 'ethnographer and his or her language are inevitably a part of the phenomena that is being investigated' (Spencer, 2007, p.450); and, altogether a more humble process. Significantly, it is based on 'political-ethical' commitments to participants and social justice more generally (Skeggs, 2007).

It is this sense of responsibility, or 'answerability' in Bakhtinian terms, which motivates my efforts towards interpretation in this study. Bakhtin (1993) emphasises that answerability fundamentally involves acting while still remaining open. In this sense, knowledge and the act of knowing are always tentative and fallible but involve an 'effort of understanding' (Holquist, 1990: xlii). This includes taking the risk of expressing interpretations – even with the knowledge they might be wrong. Indeed, any

presentation of data, no matter how 'messy' the text, involves aspects of selection and interpretation of data. Without making these acts explicit in research, however, responsibility is displaced on to the readers of texts or even the 'voices' of research participants, often – and certainly in the case of this study – those from marginalised collectivities (Albon and Rosen, 2014).

As discussed above, answerability involves bringing researcher knowledges to bear on the research object and in the case of critically-oriented research seeking, if not necessarily succeeding, to offer transformative explanations and possibilities for the often unjust and unequal conditions participants, and indeed researchers, live within (Mus, 2012). Making interpretations need not instantiate a relation of domination between researcher and participants. As Skeggs (2004b, p.131) notes, a researcher's interpretation might draw on academic knowledge which has 'epistemological authority'; however, the particular form of 'inequality of knowledge' between researcher and participants does not negate the 'moral equality' between researcher and participant. The critical orientation of this ethnography, however, does surface tensions: whilst critique is an important part of critical research, the concern here lies in not wanting to lay blame or even pathologise individuals or slip into simplistic formulations of power and institutional authority such as adult-educator versus child. Throughout the thesis, then, there is an effort to consider both the material and discursive conditions under which particular practices are generated as well as what these practices produce, unintentionally or otherwise. In other words, this is an effort to shift focus from particular individuals to the 'double-voices' with which people speak and act, an idea which will be developed further below. This process does not need to negate participants' own transformative knowledges, which I sought to engage with throughout the study through careful observation as well as the questions I asked and the practices I held up for reflection. Based on this necessary ground clearing, I will now move on to a more specific look at the data analysis process undertaken in this thesis.

3.5.1 From generation to analysis

The process of turning fieldnotes and transcriptions into lines of analysis is an iterative one, involving a continual movement between data and analysis and back to more focused data generation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). For the sake of clarity, I have divided the process used in this thesis into four types of analysis, but this belies the more fluid process I engaged in throughout the ethnography. All data storage and 'coding' was done in NVIVO; although, as I will go on to discuss this had only limited utility in relation to my more intensive mode of analysis.

In the initial weeks of the ethnography, I began to develop a series of descriptive codes which I used from roughly January-December 2011 (Appendix 12). From January 2012-July 2012, I moved to a slightly more analytic set of codes which focused on relationships both in and between the data, interactions, and processes (Appendix 13). At the end of the Summer 2011 and Autumn 2011 terms, I took advantage of the natural break in routine and wrote a summary of my analysis to date – an extended ‘analytic note’ where the progress of the research is reviewed, the research problem is clarified, and strategies for the next steps of the research process are developed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). From January 2012-July 2012, I began to write more developed analytic notes on a consistent basis as the research topic clarified and became progressively more focused.

In the process of writing these analytic notes I became increasingly aware of my frustration with the process of coding data. Coding seemed to imply a need to find repeatable patterns in the death/violence play I was observing and despite my efforts to apply multiple codes to chunks of data, the process felt as though it was leading me into de-contextualised and reductive forms of analysis. Whilst coding is intended as a way to help manage and organise the vast amounts of data generated in ethnographic studies, it inherently summarises or reduces data to constituent parts. As a result, while I continued – however reluctantly – to assign the relational codes to my data, I began to look for other ways to approach data analysis.

The approach to analysis which seemed most suited to working with data in a way that recognised its complex, processual, and contextual nature was the practice of selecting ‘critical moments’ and subjecting them to a slightly revised ‘Bakhtinian interpretive’ analysis (Tobin and Kurban, 2009; Tobin, 2000). The origin of the ‘critical moment’ as I use it in the context of this study lies in a number of sources most notably in Connolly’s (2008, p.177) use of ‘critical incidents’ in his detailed examination of data which included rare but explicit ‘racialised and sexualised discourses’. Similarly, in her study of student exclusions, Youdell (2006, p.70) works her analysis outward from specific pieces of data through the ‘detailed unpicking of the minutiae of discursive practices’ evident in short excerpts of fieldnotes. She argues that the exhaustive level of analysis involved means that only a small portion of data can be subjected to this process.

Significantly, neither researcher follows a logic of representation in the sense of claiming data excerpts to be representative of the setting under study or aims for saturation, the exhaustion of new categories (Bowen, 2008). Instead, these pieces of data were chosen because they ‘stand out’ (Youdell, 2006, p.70) as opportunities to explore particular questions, practices, and ‘underlying relationships’ and ‘social

dynamics' (Connolly, 2008, p.177) identified as salient in the ethnographic process. Critical moments can also be selected for moments of doubt, ambiguity, or contradiction which, as Tobin (2000, p.13) argues following Vološinov (1976), are 'windows onto the conflicts and tensions of the larger society to which the speaker belongs'. In this way the 'critical' in the terminology is not a reference to any inherent characteristics in the data, but to what the data offers by way of a 'vantage point' (Connolly, 2008, p.177). Slightly pedantically, I have elected to use the term 'moment' rather than 'incident' as this implies a negative rupture, whereas I have selected data that is not only exceptional but also so commonplace that it may have otherwise passed unnoticed.

The use of critical moments in research analysis is consistent with a critical realist perspective on emergence (see section 2.1). In this account, even if an event or phenomena occurs only once this indicates the possibility of considering the conditions of its production; indeed, even the absence of an event does not mean that it can never occur, just that it has not yet occurred or at least has not been observed in the domain of the 'Empirical'. Social research can, therefore, take a single instance or 'critical moment' as an opportunity to engage in explanatory critique considering: What are the conditions which made this moment possible? What is the emergent nature of the 'critical moment', which is irreducible to the conditions of its production?

In analysing critical moments I use an adaption of the 'Bakhtinian interpretative approach' developed by Tobin (2000) in his study of children's thinking and talk about media. In this approach, excerpts of transcripts are selected, much in the way of 'critical moments', and subjected to a rigorous and detailed analysis drawing on four key Bakhtinian principles which Tobin (2000, pp.20-22) summarises as:

1. The meaning of an utterance is always contextual.
2. The word is only half ours.
3. The content of psychic life is thoroughly ideological.
4. We have an ethical imperative to answer.

I have already discussed the Bakhtinian notion of answerability (point 4), but to expand in relation to the other points, let me begin with Vološinov (1976, p.79) point that the word is only half ours (point 2):

Not a single instance of verbal utterance can be reckoned exclusively to its utterer's account. Every utterance is the product of the interaction between speakers and the product of the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges.

What Vološinov is getting at here is that when a person speaks, the utterance takes place at the 'borderline' of selves, rather than as an autonomous or individual speech act. On one side of the utterance is the past: the words we use and the meanings 'joined' to those words are always full of direct or indirect citations from the immediate conversation or more distant interactions, discourses, and material conditions. On the other side of an utterance is the reply. An utterance, whether spoken or in 'inner speech', is always 'populated' with the anticipated responses of others. Yet, an utterance is not entirely imitative or the property of another as the speaker puts her own intention on it, borne out of his/her specific history rather than inner 'authenticity' (Burkitt, 1998), and uses it in an always unique context (point 1). Such a conceptualisation allows Bakhtin (1981, p.293) to assert that language is 'double-voiced' and an utterance is always 'half someone else's'. Further, Vološinov (1976, p.88) asserts that these utterances are informed by concrete, material conditions of life, leading him to argue that 'any human verbal utterance is an ideological construct in the small' (point 3).

Vološinov (1986, p.13) emphasises the verbal as 'the ideological phenomena par excellence' given that its primary purpose is semiotic, unlike physical movement for instance which exceeds the symbolic. The notion of the dialogic, however, can be helpfully appropriated for consideration of embodied action, what I will refer to as dialogic bodies¹⁹, in a way that is consistent with the Bakhtinian circle's emphasis on corporeality (Bakhtin, 1984b) and 'real deeds' as much as 'thought deeds' (Bakhtin, 1993). Just as the Bakhtinian circle argue that utterances take place on the borders of selves, Elias (1994, p.213) proposes that while certain aspects of corporeality can be seen as spatially situated (for example, the brain in the skull), human beings as a whole – including our bodily fluids, contours, and affects – are not hermetically sealed off from others but are 'mutually oriented and dependent'. This suggests, as with the Bakhtinian utterance, that the body needs to be understood as contextually situated and relational, enacted in response to previous speech or embodied action as well as being anticipatory of responses from others.

Tobin's (2000) work suggests the productivity of applying these Bakhtinian principles as an interpretative framework for critical moments in research with children about death/violence play. It shifts focus away from developmental trajectories where contradictory statements or practices are rooted in the individual to consider talk and practices as 'local manifestations of a larger social discourse' (Tobin, 2000, p.22) or

¹⁹ At this point the discussion of dialogic bodies is primarily methodological. In Chapter 7, I develop the same notion in more analytic terms as a way to account for identifications across ludic and everyday worlds.

material organisation of the social order. While Tobin (Tobin and Kurban, 2009; Tobin, 2000) focuses primarily on verbal transcripts of interviews, this study also analyses fieldnotes and video transcriptions paying particular attention not only to the verbal, but to the corporeal, sensuous, and sonic aspects of the dialogic. Working analysis primarily through 'critical moments' is not a dismissal of the coding process in entirety, however. In Chapter 4 and 5, where I situate Westside Nursery and death/violence play in terms of sociospatial relations, I draw primarily on analysis developed through the coding process. Further, no critical moment used in this thesis stands on its own: each moment necessarily interacts with and calls upon other pieces of data which have been identified and organised through the use of coding.

In conclusion, this chapter has focused on research methodology, describing the way that the critical ethnography which forms the basis of this thesis was conducted. I have outlined some of the tensions encountered in the research process as I aimed to work with ethical answerability engaged with concerns for social justice and equality.

CHAPTER 4:

An account of Westside Nursery in terms of sociospatial relations

Thus far, the chapters have outlined the genesis of the present study, its location in relation to the professional and academic field, as well as its conceptual and methodological orientation. The chapters which follow will offer a sustained interrogation and analysis of the data generated in this critical ethnography, beginning with the present chapter which offers a contextualising account of Westside Nursery in sociospatial terms.

Human practices, such as death/violence play, take place and are assigned meanings within material spaces. Rather than being absolute or static entities, a consistent point in much contemporary literature is that spaces are fundamentally social in constitution (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008). Social spaces, 'the subset of physical space that is colonised, reproduced and transformed by human societies' (Sayer, 2000, p.110), are inherited but are reordered through sociospatial relations and human activity (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008), notwithstanding the concurrent impact of environmental and other non-human objects and processes.

Indicating that all objects and phenomena have a temporal and spatial dimension, Sayer (2000, p.111) uses the conjunction 'space-time-process' and in so doing points to the importance of considering both specificity and change in social research. In seeking to investigate death/violence play it becomes important, therefore, to situate Westside Nursery geographically and historically, thus contextualising – in more traditionally sociological terms – the account offered in this thesis. In so doing, I will draw on the conceptual language put forward in the discipline of human geography, drawing particularly on Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (2008, p.394) who offer a way to write about the multidimensionality of sociospatial relations in a move to produce 'thick descriptions and more concrete-complex explanations for given research objects'. Reviewing a series of 'turns' in spatial theorising: place, territory, scale, and networks, the authors argue for the productivity of considering the interaction of these different dimensions of spatiality rather than viewing the concepts associated with each 'turn' as supplanting those which came prior. Each of the four dimensions can be investigated as a field in itself or in relation to another field; however, it is fundamentally insufficient and indeed reductive, they argue, to only consider sociospatial relations from a singular dimension.

In this chapter, then, I will focus on Westside Nursery as a 'territory' constituted by 'porous' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000) external borders and internal boundaries, interacting within multiple scalar levels. It is my intention here to convey and give credence to the processual character of sociospatial relations and spaces, which necessarily require ongoing reconstitution. In seeking to write a comprehensible account, however, the object of study is inherently simplified given the difficulty of capturing synchronicity (Sayer, 2000) and complexity. The result is that the setting, relations, and people under study may appear 'fixed', at least at a particular spatial-temporal conjuncture, a tension which this account will attempt to negotiate.

4.1 Westside Nursery as a 'territory'

As I approach Westside Nursery for the first time, I can hear the sounds of children's voices rising above the woven reed fence which blocks all views from outside. I turn the corner and a solid brick building appears. It is not tall, but it seems to dominate the vertical space. The structure is much larger than I expected, and I later discover it is only partially the nursery; the rest of the large brick building is a local housing estate. Although the nursery is right in the centre of a booming residential neighbourhood, bordering on shopping streets, a small park, and a local university, its clearly demarcated boundaries make it feel like an entirely separate world.

I walk up the stairs to the main door of the Nursery, almost hidden beneath an overhang at the top of the steps. As I am buzzed in, I feel as though I am crossing a strongly-fortified barricade. The low-ceilinged entrance vestibule opens on to a desk where a receptionist sits facing the front glass doors. I approach, and she indicates that I should sign in, a typical practice in UK buildings as a way of keeping track of comings and goings. Having spent most of my life in Vancouver, Canada, where educational institutions are always ostensibly welcoming with their unlocked doors and open hallways, this evokes strange feelings of discomfort in me.

The entrance area provides no sight or sound of the children and educators who make this nursery their space on a daily basis. It is not until I reach the receptionist's desk that I am able to look down through a long set of windows and the sense of life that I have been anticipating becomes visible. The space looks so oddly familiar that I can almost imagine that I never left Canada. The long open-plan room is bright and airy, separated by low-level shelving into 'disciplinary areas' – water, art, 'home corner', blocks, writing, reading, sand, and Play-Doh. Materials are organised in baskets and containers, small chairs encircle 'child-sized' tables, and young children move fluidly throughout the space. Large glass doors open on to an inviting looking outdoor space.

I feel excited: this is the moment I have been waiting for in the research process. I also feel nervous. Will the Head of the setting like me and allow me to do my research at her setting? Will I like the setting? Will this be a place where I want to spend a substantial portion of the next year and a half?

(Fieldnote, 6th January 2011)

In this fieldnote, which I recorded after visiting Westside Nursery to explore the potential of conducting my fieldwork at the setting, the neighbourhood and early childhood setting appear as 'division[s] of space into containers' (Johnston, 2001, p.683), often referred to in geography using the language of territory. While the term territory has traditionally been associated with the nation state, new conceptualisations have moved to 'unbundle' the two concepts, and instead consider boundaries and their concomitant inclusions/exclusions at various scales through the concept of territory (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008). Territorial divisions, Johnston (2001, p.683) argues, are primarily fashioned for 'the exercise of power and the ease of administration'. As with any such demarcations, it is important to keep in mind however that these are socially constructed and porous, subject to incursions, border crossings, and reconfigurations. It is these ideas which will be explored in the following sections in relation to Westside Nursery, including through further consideration of the above fieldnote.

4.1.1 External borders

Striking in the above fieldnote is a sense of the way the materiality of boundaries creates different contexts for social relations within just a few feet of each other. Visually, the activity that takes place within Westside Nursery is hidden from the outside, even in the liminal space at the front vestibule. Only sounds, and a few glimpses of playground equipment, provide any hint of the activity taking place within the setting to those on the outside. This visible obscuration is intensified by the practice of being 'buzzed in' and signing in, a highly regulated process of accessing the setting and one required of anyone entering – including parents, children, and staff members. These practices of 'boundarying' served to keep both the outside out and the inside in on two levels at least: they separated bodies into those which were included and excluded from particular spaces and, in so doing, they re-instantiated a bifurcation of the activities and spaces primarily associated with childhood and adulthood, albeit that these boundaries were traversed on a daily basis as parents/carers dropped off and picked up children inside the setting and indeed adults worked within the space.

Boundaries around early childhood settings are generally justified by a concern for the safety of young children, a way to ensure that children in the care of the setting are kept in secure surroundings as opposed to the uncertain and potentially dangerous spaces beyond. As Valentine (1996) points out, public spaces have become

increasingly off-limits to children in the UK as a result of growing fears of strangers and urbanisation. Whilst I am certainly not trying to suggest that young children do not require protection, which such boundaries arguably offer, it is notable the extent to which such fears are socially constructed and self-reinforcing in a way that can have the unintended effect of reducing childhood to a state of dependency and essential inability to evaluate and manage risk (Wyver *et al.*, 2010). At Westside Nursery, for instance, the constraining physicality of the borders did not only ensure that children stayed within the setting but also served to visually separate the setting from the outside public space. Indeed, at times during this study when children climbed a set of risers at the back of the outdoor space, an activity otherwise considered acceptable, they were called back down by educators in the setting if they peered over the fence.

The 'boundarying' practices also regulated who could come into the setting. In one sense, this is related to similar fears which translated into efforts to keep undesirable or dangerous adults away from children, part of the legacy of the 1996 'Dunblane school massacre'. But this also has to do with administrative concerns about access to early childhood care and education. In the English context, full-day care and education for young children is not a universal entitlement and there is a general shortage of places: in the catchment area where Westside Nursery is located there were over 2 children for every available childcare place (Local Authority [name withheld], 2012). As a result, there were strict rules about which children are able to access, and therefore cross the boundaries, into Westside Nursery.

Part-time places funded by the national entitlement for preschool education were allocated to 40 children who lived within ½ mile from Westside Nursery and were between 3-4-years-old. An additional 20 places were available for full-time care which ran from 9.15-3.15. Here, the national entitlement was supplemented by local authority funding for these places; they were allocated in order of the following criteria set by the local authority:

1. Children looked after by the state or who have a child protection plan.
2. Children with a disability or Special Educational Need.
3. Children in circumstances where the Headteacher/Governing body considers a full time place to be beneficial.

During the course of my research, these 60 places (40 part-time and 20 full-time) were always full with a list of families waiting to fill any vacancies.

Up to 20 more full-time places were available through the national Children in Need programme, set out by the Children Act 1989, and allocated by a local authority panel. According to government guidance:

Children who are defined as in need under the Children Act 1989 are those whose vulnerability is such that they are unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health and development, or their health and development will be significantly impaired without the provision of services. (Department of Health, 2000, p.5)

This funding was generally used to support a group of younger children who ranged from 18-36 months; although, a few older children also received this funding. These places were not fully occupied during the course of this research, a typical situation according to the Head. Finally, Westside Nursery offered self-funded extended provision for a small group of children prior to and following the regular sessions. This extended provision was run by a teaching assistant and did not come under the same curricular or pedagogical scrutiny of the staff.

In essence, these allocation policies meant that full-time children in the setting generally came from families dealing with multiple issues of hardship. This is in keeping with the historical division between education and care in the UK (Daniel and Ivatts, 1998) with the provision of free childcare places offered only on a targeted basis as opposed to part-time nursery education which is universally available. Many of the educators at Westside Nursery expressed a sense of fulfilment in relation to the services they provided to families who were struggling or facing hardships and often referred to the social class of families in the setting as a way of distinguishing themselves from another nearby local authority setting. The ‘outstanding’ rating awarded to Westside Nursery by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OfSTED), the national inspectorate, during the period of my research was both proudly received and worrying for educators at the same time: *‘Now, we’ll probably get all sorts of demanding middle-class families coming in,’* one educator commented informally at lunch time. The tension here is that being categorised as ‘at risk’ or facing hardship is often drawn along social class and ethnic lines (James, 2012) with early childhood institutions viewed in policy as a redemptive force tasked with compensating for supposed ‘lacks’ in children’s home lives (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

Despite coming from the same local area, there was notable diversity in the setting, with a broad range of home languages spoken, diverse ethnicities, and a variety of religious and non-religious affiliations. Christianity and Islam were prominent, but children from other religious backgrounds also attended the setting. The following table, based on data provided by families to the setting, details the diversity of the setting during the two school years when this ethnography was conducted.

School	Number	% boys	% girls	Home	Children on	Ethnicity
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year	of children			languages spoken²⁰	free school meals²¹	
2010-2011 (at 10th May 2011)	70	60%	40%	15; 53% of children spoke a home language other than English	15; 50% of full-times	24 categories selected; 11.4% White British
2011-2012 (at 30th April 2012)	78	62.8%	37.2%	14; 52% of children spoke a home language other than English	13; 34.2% of full-timers	23 categories selected; 12.8% White British

Parents/carers were welcomed into the setting at drop off and pick up times, but this too was highly regulated with doors opening at set times and parents/carers encouraged, and perhaps also needing or desiring, to sign their child in and leave the setting as soon as possible. At most moments in time then, Westside Nursery – as is common in many early childhood settings – was composed of large groups of children and a significantly smaller group of adults tasked with caring for and educating young children. ‘Child-specific’ spaces such as Westside Nursery constitute what Zeiher (2003, p.66) provocatively refers to as ‘islands’ of dislocation where ‘the societal differentiation of childhood is reflected in the urban landscape as segregation of places for children and for adults’.

Indeed the English education system has developed as a spatially separated place of childhood based on ideas about children’s ‘peculiar needs and characteristics’

²⁰ Without wanting to reinforce ‘White British’ and ‘English’ as the norm from which all diversity is measured, it does seem important to demonstrate the extent to which this setting does not conform to stereotypical views of pupil demographics in the British educational system (e.g. as white, English speakers).

²¹ ‘Free school meals’ often serve as a proxy measurement for poverty, rather than social class, in the UK. In this case the measurement indicates take-up, rather than eligibility; (non)take-up is often affected by socio-cultural views about accessing government benefits (Gilborn and Mirza, 2000).

(Hendrick, 1997, p.50), which for young children often centre around a generalised ascription of lack of competence and vulnerability. As the fieldnote above began to indicate, everything from the child-sized furniture to the predominance of activities associated with pretence and preparation served to set Westside Nursery apart from the world of work, politics, and responsibility often associated with adulthood (Qvortrup, 2005). The nursery, on this view, becomes an idealised space, insulated from the harsh and dangerous realities of the adult world in keeping with the romantic notions of childhood put forward by Rousseau and developed pedagogically by Pestalozzi and Fröebel in the form of the 'kindergarten' (Chung and Walsh, 2000). In many ways then the world beyond the reed fence served as a 'constitutive outside' (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008), spatially delineating Westside Nursery in opposition to that which was beyond its borders, albeit that spatial generation never works in an entirely straightforward and uncontested manner (Prout, 2005), a point I will take up in Section 4.1.4.

4.1.2 Internal boundaries: places within the 'territory'

To this point I have highlighted the reed fence as a border between Westside Nursery and the 'outside' world as well as between childhood and adulthood. A territory is not homogenous, however, and can be understood as also constituted by internal boundaries (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008). In Westside Nursery, these demarcations operated through vertical differentiation as well as through other spatial indicators.

Each floor of Westside Nursery had specific functions and associated activities. The top floor, often the most desirable space in a building if the valuation of 'penthouse suites' or 'room with a view' is taken as an indication, was the part of the setting most closely linked to adult activity. It included office space for administrative workers and educators engaged in documenting assessment profiles; a staff room where educators took their breaks; as well as two meeting rooms. The smaller of these was used primarily by the myriad of professionals who came to assess, monitor, and support children with various special education and emotional needs and the larger one was used for adult education classes and meetings with setting families. A crèche used in conjunction with these activities was also located on the top floor. The main floor included the entrance vestibule, as described in the fieldnote above; the kitchen where hot lunches were prepared; two eating rooms, one of which doubled as the 'peg room' where children hung their coats and other belongings from home; the small storage

room where I conducted interviews; and a room used primarily for story time for the group of children considered of the 'highest' ability and the most 'school-ready':

I mentioned to the educators that I would begin by interviewing the upstairs story group. Dhurata commented: 'Those are the more intelligent and capable ones.' Paulette responded quickly: 'But we don't say that.' Dhurata replied: 'But in the staff room it's OK to say.' Paulette looked at her sternly: 'Not in front of the children.'

(Fieldnote, 30th January 2012)

The next floor down, the ground floor, was one large space which children were able to move fluidly around during the 'free time' portions of the schedule. A wide variety of resources was easily accessible and would often be moved around the ground floor during the course of daily activity. A set of doors, propped open in the warmer months and easily opened by children when closed, led into an outdoor space which wrapped around two sides of the building. It was from this outdoor space that I could hear the sounds of children emanating when I first walked past; indeed, rain or shine, this outdoor space was actively used. Educators planned for the space as they did for the inside, often setting up climbing and other 'gross motor' equipment. A small treed area – with exposed dirt, a low table, and ringed with bamboo and other mid-height trees – was off to one side of the outdoor area, perhaps one of the most hidden spaces accessible to the children.

Despite the permeable physical division between the indoor and outdoor spaces, the boundary was marked in terms of expectations and monitoring of behaviour. As has been noted in other studies (Rogers and Lapping, 2012; Stephenson, 2002), inside the setting children were encouraged to move slowly and speak quietly in comparison to the more permissive approach to activity outside. When I first began observing, children were often sent outside when their activity became louder or more physically active. Eva, the Head, explained: *'Because the inside is open plan, we try to keep it quieter so that children can concentrate. We want to make sure there is a space for children to do the quiet things.'* The emphasis on a calm, quiet, and orderly nursery was a concern shared by many educators in Westside Nursery, but resonates with early childhood educators more generally (Phelan, 1997). Perhaps as a result, much of the death/violence play I observed took place in the outdoor space. As time went on and I increasingly became identified with this type of activity, children would often take me outside immediately upon my arrival. Likewise, I generally moved outside to observe if I wasn't 'taken up' by a particular group, both because I anticipated finding the type of play I was studying in the outdoors and because I did not want to

exacerbate any tensions with the educators in the setting by supporting or condoning, through my presence, play that they did not find acceptable in the indoor space.

Just as the boundary between the indoor and outdoor space was not a physical constraint as much as a social boundary symbolised by the glass doors, a series of carpets spread throughout the room provided another set of important, but non-physically impeding, boundaries. Three carpets on the ground floor served as the location where parents/carers would sign their child in at the start of a session through the use of a photo board. Most parents/carers stopped at the edge of the carpet and allowed their child to sign-in independently; the edge of the carpet seemed to mark a spatial transition of responsibility for a child from parent/carer to Nursery. Each carpet was associated with one or two 'key people': essentially the key person acted as a single point of contact between parents/carers and the setting and each key worker had primary responsibility for documenting and assessing the development of a small group of children (generally 12 children).²² At the end of each 'free time' part of the session, children would gather on their carpet before being separated into groupings for story time. I was often asked by children which 'carpet' I was associated with, indicating their importance to the children. Two of these carpets served as the story time locations for those children who were considered of '*middle-ability*'.

A smaller basement space included clusters of toilets, visible from the ground floor through a series of sky lights; a library for book lending and used for one '*middle-ability*' story group; a small room used for story group and one-on-one sessions with those children considered to have the most severe special educational needs; and, an open room used primarily by the youngest group of children, those under three.

Decisions about this vertically-differentiated spatial organisation were likely made for pragmatic reasons and therefore were not necessarily intentionally hierarchical; however, the vertical structuring of the setting ultimately ended up reflecting broader inequalities. Spaces associated primarily with adult activity, for instance, were at the highest levels of the setting; children's story groups were vertically structured in a way that reflected estimations and valuations of their abilities, with those of '*higher*' ability placed physically higher in the building and those of '*lower*' ability placed in the basement. It is likely then that the vertical organisation and bounding of space did not only inadvertently mirror, but also had the effect of reproducing, inequalities. Metaphors

²² Elfer *et al.* (2003, p.18) developed the key person approach to promote attachment relationships in settings. Provision of a key person for each child and family is now a statutory responsibility (DCSF, 2008b). This approach, however, can end up reproducing the educator as a 'mother-substitute' and overemphasising dyadic adult-child relationships at the cost of peer or group relations (Pearson and Degotardi, 2009).

often conflate height and authority such as 'breaking the glass ceiling'. These linguistic associations are sustained by a series of experimental studies conducted by Giessner and Schubert (2007, p.12) in Western Europe which suggest that evaluations of authority are linked to a person's 'vertical positions in space' and by research with young children which indicates the importance placed on height in part due to its association with adulthood. Children used height as a marker of status (James, 2000) and high spaces were favoured in play as a way to gain temporary control in a space inaccessible to adults (Corsaro, 1985). Indeed, on at least two separate occasions during this study, as she walked up to the first floor room for the 'high' ability story group, Cecilia used a sing-song voice to tease children remaining on the ground floor: 'We're going upstairs!' suggesting that the vertical organisation of space was read and reproduced as a marker of status amongst at least some of the children.

4.1.3 Spatial-temporal disciplining and the spatial division of labour

In keeping with the point that territoriality is about relations of power, James *et al.* (1998, p.39) argue that 'social space is never a mere issue of neutral location', pointing to the way that educational institutions involve relations of control or spatial-temporal disciplining. Surveillance is a key technology in such regulatory practices in early childhood settings in the UK and beyond (e.g. Albon, 2008; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2009; Holligan, 2000). Indeed, the layout of Westside Nursery, with its open plan and visible spaces, allowed for virtually unobstructed observation of many of children's practices. My fieldnotes indicate a sense of the space functioning as a panopticon, to draw on the Foucauldian metaphor, which opens up all setting participants to potential surveillance at all times:

A series of windows lines each of the rooms on the top two floors allowing staff and visitors to look down upon the children and educators on the floor of the nursery. On many days, I have looked down and surveyed the scene, separate and removed from the day-to-day action, hoping to catch glimpses of the children without my 'interfering' presence.

As time goes on, I realise this is not a simple, unidirectional form of observation. Children are very aware of these windows and hold them in high regard as this is where a family member's face will often be glimpsed at pick-up time. Spotting me looking down from the window often gives a child 'first dibs' on my presence in their play. Although, I don't want to overestimate the sense of control I have in this scenario: I can step back and avoid being seen and it is always me who decides when to come down into the nursery world.

(6th February 2012)

Indeed, notepads and cameras were ubiquitous in the setting as educators tracked and recorded children's activity for later reflection. These observational practices, however, were not unequivocally taken up. Lunchtimes and my interviews with educators were rife with complaints about observation requirements: '*Maybe if I didn't have to observe I could join in the children's play*', '*They want us to document children's learning but then get mad when we aren't protecting children from accidents*', and '*You just never feel that you have caught up with all the observations*'.

As these comments suggest, surveillance of children's movements is in part motivated by concerns to protect young children, considered particularly or even essentially vulnerable, given the 'obsession' (Penn, 2011b, p.99) with health and safety in UK early childhood settings. It is also driven by the need to document, assess, and provide proof of supporting children's learning under statutory requirements such as the Childcare Act 2006 and more specifically the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008b)²³, which is monitored by regulatory bodies such as OfSTED.

Surveillance practices and their impacts can be understood, on the analysis of James *et al.* (1998, p.56) following Foucault, as part of a more general shift in the social where power has become 'invisible' and 'mobile' leading to a sense of always being watched and from everywhere.

Another way children's lives are subject to spatial-temporal disciplining, argue Holloway and Valentine (2000, p.772), is through the timetable or schedule which 'requires pupils to be in the right place, at the right time, to learn the right things'. At Westside Nursery, the daily schedule was not absolute, nor was it rigidly adhered to, but each day followed the same general routine (Appendix 14). Unlike some settings which timetable toileting, snacks, and nap times (e.g. see Albon, 2008; Leavitt and Power, 1997), at Westside Nursery such practices were generally left to the children to monitor in relation to their own bodily rhythms. There was also a degree of flexibility as to where children could be and what they could do in the 'open choice' parts of the schedule; although, as I have already suggested in relation to indoor/outdoor boundaries, this was not straightforward and I will return to the complex framings and spatial-temporal disciplining of death/violence play in the next chapter. Spatial-temporal disciplining was most noticeable, however, during what I am referring to as 'official activities', those which were more formally organised and managed including lunch time, transitions, story times, and 'adult-focus activities'. These activities were explicitly regulated by

²³ Throughout this thesis I will refer to the 2008 version of the statutory national early years curriculum (DCSF, 2008b). A new version (DfE, 2012d) was nationally legislated and implemented in the Autumn after my field work was complete. Whilst discussion was already taking place amongst educators about the new curriculum, it was not the document which informed and gave shape to their work.

adults in terms of who was obliged to participate, who was allowed to participate, as well as where and what participants were allowed to do; unlike the more open part of the timetable, negotiations were substantively limited during these official activities.

Lunch tables, story groups, and key person groups were allocated primarily by the Head, although she stressed that this happened in consultation with other educators; children were not involved in these decisions. Story groups, as mentioned above, were allocated based on perceived ability. Key person groups were formed through consideration of a desire to: mix ages; keep siblings together; put families together who spoke similar home languages as they '*have the capacity to form bonds*' (Eva); and, build on the strengths of the key person. Lunch table places were allocated based on knowledge of children and anticipated dynamics between children – sometimes putting friends together and at other times placing them apart to encourage new connections. The Head also noted that this was the main opportunity that she had to be with children given her other administrative duties so she would put the children at her table who she was '*very interested in*'. At the beginning of the school year and when groups were changed, educators could be seen walking around the setting gathering children into their story groups or indicating that children should move to a particular carpet. Without wanting to negate the careful and concerned consideration the educators gave to constructing these groupings, the point here is that the decisions were made by adults about children's lives and constituted a set of rules which shaped possibilities for relationships, interactions, learning, and even assessment. As the children became more familiar with the required spatial organisation of their bodies during these 'official activities', they generally placed themselves in the 'correct' group and indeed monitored those who violated the assigned placements. Indeed, the sense of being constantly surrounded by potential surveillance, James *et al.* (1998) point out, can lead to regulation of the self: the child becomes his/her own disciplinary control.

Story groups in the carpeted spaces were a time replete with expectations about bodily comportment and the use of space. Whilst there was some variation in expectations amongst the educators who led story group sessions, with some provoking more open-ended discussion and others leading more didactic teaching sessions, expectations were generally consistent internally as well as with those reported in other English settings (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2010b). Particularly as the groups rose in 'ability level', children were expected to sit up straight and remain relatively still – '*Don't wiggle, cross your legs*', Tashelle directed the children on numerous occasions – unless specified forms of movement were required for a planned activity. A requirement to maintain distance between bodies was inconsistently implemented; only when touch was

considered to be disruptive were children told to keep their *'hands to themselves'*. Unlike other spaces in the setting, in the story groups, children were expected to direct commentary to the educator rather than a peer, and the use of hand-raising to answer questions was encouraged. Similar to other settings in the UK (e.g. see Albon, 2008), children were expected to attune their bodily needs to the setting schedule – such as eating when it was 'lunchtime' – as well as being in the lunch space in particular ways including: occupying an assigned seat, sitting quietly at the table, waiting to touch their food until everyone at the table had been served, and staying at the table until everyone was finished. That said, Westside Nursery was remarkably relaxed in comparison to many other settings; for example, eating with hands was treated no differently than eating with utensils.

'Official activities' at Westside Nursery – particularly group times, adult-focus activities, and meal times – were generally those most associated with social and policy expectations about behaviour and development. As Albon (2010, p.2) contends, 'Food events are occasions when children's bodies are especially subject to civilizing processes in terms of space; time; focusing on the task not the child; 'body rules'; and future-centredness.' Group times and adult-focus activities, as well as the spaces in which they took place, were generally viewed as leading directly to necessary learning as framed by nationally mandated early learning goals and more general valuation of those skills, abilities, and knowledges associated with 'school readiness'(DCSF, 2008b). Indeed, reference to compulsory school was used as a way to enforce spatial disciplining: Penny commented firmly to two children who began pushing each other at group time, *'Sit up now. You are all going to big school soon.'*

In a sense, there was a spatial division of activity, or labour, which took place: 'official activities' and the spaces they took place in were generally accorded greater value by educators. These were the activities which were most often documented and displayed: in assessments, children's profile books, and on the walls of the setting. 'Adult-focus activities' also occupied a great deal of discussion in the daily planning meetings as the leading educator would report on the events and pass observational notes about individual children's participation to their key person. These more official activities were not the only focus of daily meetings, however. Educators would also review the various 'disciplinary areas' mentioned in the fieldnote above, noting which children had spent time in which areas and roughly the type of activity they had engaged in. These observations were transferred from individual educator's notebooks to larger pages, to be stored in the setting's files, in effect creating a record of activity within fixed spatial locations.

What this discussion and recording practice failed to document, and in many ways devalued as a result, were those practices which were essentially mobile transversals of space or made use of multiple disciplinary areas. In part, this was related to the spatial disciplining of educators themselves: each educator had a particular role assigned each day which fixed them to a particular spatial location. One week, an educator might be on 'adult-focus' – which indicated attachment to a particular activity in a specific space – and another week she might be on outdoor play. As a result, when children's activity crossed internal boundaries, it was generally understood that the educator would not, but would stay in her assigned area. This spatial-temporal disciplining provoked a sense of frustration amongst educators. During an interview, Hayat commented: *'It is so beneficial to have an adult committed to the play. I do that when I can, but now that I'm "float" [overall responsibility for the inside area] for the afternoon it is even harder.'* In essence, this sociospatial organisation meant that much of the activity which transgressed the arbitrary boundaries of the space, as much death/violence play did, became invisible in curriculum planning.

To sum up the preceding discussion: at the same time as surveillance and regulation during official activities can be viewed as disciplinary, there is a sense in which the value and possibility of activities which were outside of this lens also suffered, albeit a different fate. They were generally either treated as incursions in the sociospatial relational order and subject to disciplinary measures, such as being sent outdoors, and/or they became virtually invisible in planning meetings, separated from pedagogical consideration. In responding to a question about the relative absence of discussions of imaginative play in planning meetings, Dhurata explained this valuation in the following way: *'I wouldn't say it's not important. But we have to prioritise. It gets put to the bottom.'* This is not to say that educators only participated in officially-oriented interactions, certainly not, or that they never engaged in imaginative play with children, but to stress the effects of sociospatial relations on the division of labour and valuing processes in the setting.

4.1.4 Transitions and transgressions

To this point, I have offered an account of Westside Nursery as a territory constituted by relatively stable internal and external borders, focusing on the practices which essentially reproduced sociospatial relations. I have made only brief mention of the oppositions and incursions which challenged and even transformed these boundaries. It is, however, a 'sense of children's resourcefulness and the alliance which can be built across the adult-child divide', Holloway and Valentine (2000, p.773) maintain, which is

'in danger of being lost if we overemphasise spatial disciplining as a mechanism of control.'

In Westside Nursery, much as in Corsaro's (1985) study of an American preschool almost 30 years ago, children individually and collectively attempted to evade the spatial disciplining of the timetable, for example by hiding, slowing activity, or becoming engrossed in an activity which seemed to have been assessed by the child as educator-valued when clean-up was announced (such as beginning a focused painting rather than running and jumping). Official setting rules which required toys from home to be left in a basket at the door or in the peg room – marking the boundary between home and the setting – were evaded by educators and children alike. I often observed children huddled in small groups in the peg room examining items from home, and educators would generally wilfully ignore the presence of objects from home. As Tashelle commented: *'We say: "We discourage children from bringing toys from home in." But, we let them for comfort in the first few weeks. Sometimes it is easier for parents if they bring them in.'* When educators joined children in activities, leaving aside their notebooks and cameras, on some level they were implicitly challenging the early childhood setting as a site of surveillance and assessment as well as the distinction between childhood and adulthood symbolised by the motifs of play and work respectively. Not all challenges to spatial-temporal disciplining were as covert, however. In the final months of my research, educators made the decision to rearrange the story groups; at that point, four of the groups were no longer organised based on evaluations of ability and were not, as a consequence, vertically stratified.

On a very few occasions, these transgressions of sociospatial relations even involved an 'alliance' across generational positions:

'Green carpet' children were gathering for their story group when Hayat [the educator] got called away. Mark jumped up into the 'teacher's chair', positioned at the edge of the carpet, and looked down at the children sitting on the carpet. Hayat returned, smiled at Mark, and sat down on the floor with the children. 'Aren't you the teacher?' Raeni asked Hayat. 'No. It's Mark,' Hayat replied. Smiling broadly, Mark led the children in playing a favourite singing game: 'Jumping bean', calling children up one at a time to bounce in front of the others. He then took a book and began to 'read' it to the others but eventually handed it to Hayat. Perhaps Mark did not know the story well enough to tell it without being able to read the words, shattering the coherence of the 'teacher' role he was enacting. In any case, Hayat moved to the chair to read the book to the group. But later, Raeni asked for a turn to be the teacher and Hayat once again sat down on the carpet. Raeni settled into the chair announcing firmly to the gathering: 'Sit quietly: we're not going to do anything.'

(Fieldnote, 20th June 2011)

It is possible to interpret this moment as simply a playful interlude, a benign conferring of the symbols of authority without ultimately challenging adult control over children's lives. Raeni's request to take on the role of 'teacher' was directed at Hayat as opposed to anyone else in the carpet area, suggesting that she remained aware and consented to Hayat's position of institutional and generational authority in the space. While this moment certainly did not rewrite unequal relations in the setting, it can, however, be understood as involving a meaningful, if temporary, reworking. By holding up some of the arbitrary and repressive aspects of spatial-temporal disciplining for (collective) consideration through playful citations, humour, and a reframing of the vertical separation of adulthood and childhood, Mark, Hayat, Raeni, and the others were able to consider – even just momentarily – the possibility that sociospatial relations could be otherwise.

4.2 A scalar perspective of Westside Nursery

Despite constituting Westside Nursery as a particular territory in the above discussion, it is simultaneously necessary – from the multidimensional perspective put forward by Jessop Brenner, and Jones (2008) – to consider other spatial dimensions of Westside Nursery, including scale. Theorisations of scale generally conceptualise it as an embedding of 'smaller scale units' within 'larger scale units' (Sheppard, 2002, p.315), for example the local in the global. Holloway and Valentine (2000) are at pains to point out that larger scale units such as the 'global' cannot be conflated with 'universality'; 'global-local' relations are not the same as distinctions between the 'universal-particular'. Instead, scale theorists emphasise that scalar spaces are 'porous' and relational (Holloway and Valentine, 2000): changes in one scale both affect and are affected by changes in another scale. Scale theorists, suggests Marston (2000, p.221), generally share three suppositions, which I will maintain in this discussion. Divisions of scale are socially produced, rather than representations of an essential ontology. Despite being constructed, the second supposition is that scales and their representations do have 'material impact'. In the discussion that follows then, I will make use of largely taken-for-granted categories of scale – the local, national, and global – as these have material impact precisely because they are constituted as meaningful and accordingly they shape early childhood policy, practice, and institutional structures. A final supposition is that as contingent social structures, scalar frames are mutable in what is referred to as 'scale-jumping' and 're-scaling' (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008). Consistent with the discussion in Section 2.6, a scalar

perspective offers a way to interrogate the relationship between local everyday practices and global structures, through consideration of the: ways in which global structures, such as capitalist social relations, articulate in specific locations; global movement of policies and practices; and effects re-scaling produces (Katz, 2001).

A fieldnote will be the entry point for considering Westside Nursery from a scalar perspective:

I was sitting with a number of the educators in the staff room at lunch time. Without directing her comment to anyone in particular, Dhurata sighed, 'This new group of children is exhausting.' Other staff members glanced at her and Tashelle, one of the staff members I had seen her quite friendly with, responded: 'It's too many all at once.' I asked about the new intake of children, a larger group than the setting has ever taken in at one time because of a new 'single-point of entry' primary school policy in the borough. 'Half of them should be statemented,' Dhurata groaned, 'They need one-on-one support.' A number of other staff concurred, nodding or murmuring assent, and began discussing the learning difficulties of various children, including how this would impact their work and how their provision would be assessed by OfSTED as a result.

(5th October 2011)

On one level, this discussion can be read as symptomatic of beginning of term challenges associated with 'settling-in' new children, magnified because a change in the borough policy at the local scale meant that all 4-year-olds began reception class in September, rather than at staggered points during the year. For the first time, a whole new cohort of younger children began attending Westside Nursery at the same time. To read this only as 'beginning of term blues' is important but insufficient, however. Such a reading takes for granted the presence of large numbers of children in non-familial care and makes invisible global, national, and local scalar conditions in which such moments are produced, rendered meaningful, and indeed normalised.

In moving to a scalar perspective then, one of the noteworthy aspects of the above fieldnote is the sense of the sheer number of children entering Westside Nursery: this cannot be understood without brief consideration of early childhood care and education policy in England. By way of example, in 1986, only 41% of 3-4-year-old children were in educational programmes in Nurseries or schools (Owen and Moss, 1989), with even fewer spaces in full-time childcare (Penn, 2007); in contrast, during the period of this study, 87% of children aged 3-4-years-old used some form of formal childcare with 98% of 4-year-olds and 76% of 3-year-olds accessing free early learning provision (Huskinson *et al.*, 2013). This is suggestive of a major shift at the national scale in relation to care and education for young children in England.

This can be understood in part as a result of policy initiatives from a series of New Labour governments in the period from 1997-2010.²⁴ These initiatives ranged from the implementation of a national childcare strategy and legislation; the funding of a universal entitlement for part-time early learning provision for 3 and 4-year-olds; the development of a statutory national early years curriculum for children birth-5-years-old (DCSF, 2008b); and the development of Children's Centres in 2004, moving from the 'flagship' Sure Start model introduced in 1998 (Lewis, 2010). New Labour early childhood initiatives have been well-documented elsewhere and as well as subject to compelling critiques for their market orientation (Daly, 2011; Penn, 2011a) and individualisation of social inequalities (Clarke, 2006). As a result, the focus here will be on the way such changes at the national scale were related to the global scale as well as how they were 'enacted' at the local, specifically the borough where Westside Nursery is located.

The Children's Centre model (as with Sure Start before it) was framed as a way to address child poverty and social exclusion through the provision of programmes, services, and early childhood care and education (ECEC) for children and families, with a particular focus on low-income communities. The Children's Centre model, argues Lewis (2010, p.82), is based on the perspective that poverty can be addressed through 'an emphasis on children's cognitive development on the one hand, and parents' employment on the other.' This echoes the increasing global focus on the early years, largely drawing on arguments about the importance of the 'critical period' of brain development and concomitant arguments that educational investment in the earliest years of life will bring the greatest economic benefits (Penn, 2011c). Indeed, such logic has led to the creation of an 'Early Child Development Calculator' by the World Bank (2011), which allows for calculation of the 'economic benefits of comprehensive Early Child Development programs'. These arguments, Penn (2011c, p.97) points out, draw on: initial and inconclusive neurological research (see also Bruer, 1999); a series of localised studies in the US (such as Perry High Scope), although in the UK these same claims are also buttressed by the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education 3-11 Project (DfE, 2011); and neo-liberal theorising about human capital which emphasises maximization of individual productivity for economic benefit (and profit), as opposed to universalist or collectivist understandings of and approaches to care and education.

Policy 'transfer' (Namissan and Ball, 2010) involves complicated (re)configurations at the global and national scales given that there is not a consensus on early years

²⁴ The take-up of such initiatives cannot be understood without also attending to the shifts necessary to enabling the re-scaling of care and education of young children from the home to group settings (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Funding of third sector projects is one such method (e.g. Daycare Trust, 2012).

provision. Here, Penn (2007) points out that in developing strategies to address child poverty through women's labour market participation, the New Labour government took up prescriptions laid out by the OECD's Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs and their report *Babies and Bosses*. Contrary to research and policy strategy developed in other OECD publications (such as the *Starting Strong* reports) which laid out strategies for developing universal provision, *Babies and Bosses* focuses on demand-side incentives and privatised provision of ECEC. Reflecting this approach to ECEC, between 2002-2008 in the UK, there was a 70% increase in the for-profit provision of ECEC (of all types). In terms of part-time sessional provision, which is Westside Nursery's primary offer, 60% of this provision is operated in the voluntary sector, 34% in the private, and only 6% in the maintained sector (Brind *et al.*, 2012) with 23.5% operating on a for-profit basis (Penn, 2011a), creating a climate of competition for 'customers' between early years settings, even those who operate on a non-profit basis (Penn, 2011a).

As one of only 423 'maintained' (local authority-run) settings in England (DfE, 2012c), Westside Nursery has a slightly unusual status then. It operates on a non-profit basis and is run by a community-based governing body, with staff employed by the local authority. Westside Nursery is connected to one of the larger Children's Centres in the borough, in keeping with the original requirement that Children's Centres ensure provision of integrated early years education and care (Lewis, 2010). Consistent with the national emphasis of prioritising extended Children's Centre provision in low-income communities, Westside Nursery and its affiliated Children's Centre are located in a ward with some of the highest pockets of deprivation in England (Local Authority [name withheld], 2010). This is, however, a borough of extremes with children from some of the least and most income-deprived families living side-by-side (Local Authority [name withheld], 2012).

Whilst the discussion thus far has situated Westside Nursery in a scalar perspective through consideration of national policy shifts under successive New Labour governments, this ethnography took place after the 'heady days' (Toynbee, 2013) of New Labour promotion of early education, in the first years following the 2010 election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. During the period of this study, the Coalition government seemingly maintained the status quo in relation to early years: Children's Centres were ostensibly 'retained'; the national entitlement for early education was extended from 12 to 15 hours as had been promised by the previous government; and, a process of extending the entitlement to disadvantaged 2-year-olds was launched (DfE, 2011). The mantle of 'early intervention' was taken up,

and a series of influential reports were commissioned (Allen, 2011a; Allen, 2011b) which urged for a renewed emphasis on early intervention through the language of cost-benefit analysis and brain development, what Gillies (2013) refers to as ‘biological determinism’. As Michael Gove (2011), Secretary of State for Education, commented in a speech about the ‘importance of the early years’:

We know that there are specific changes that occur in a child’s brain in the earliest years of its life that have a disproportionate impact on that child’s fate; on that child’s capacity to be able to make the right choices and avoid the wrong temptations... We know that the range of stimuli that a child has early in life will determine whether or not that child is capable of responding well to other human beings; capable of absorbing knowledge; and capable of becoming a skilful and fully-rounded citizen in years to come....And that’s why we want to be guided by emerging science about how the brain develops...

In one sense then, for Westside Nursery it was ‘business as usual’ during this period. In other ways, this could not have been further from the case.²⁵ A number of consultations were undertaken in this period at the national scale, such as a review leading to a new statutory curriculum (DfE, 2012d). Proposals for adjustments to funding and operation were introduced in relation to adult-child ratios and educator qualifications; some changes were even piloted in a portion of boroughs, such as a ‘payment by results’ model. These proposals at the national scale, and the uncertainties they brought with them, created a sense of unease throughout the early years sector (e.g. see Moss, 2011) including Westside Nursery. Monitoring children’s attendance, raising children’s assessment profiles, and OfSTED reports – all potential criteria for determining payment by results (Valle *et al.*, 2011) – were mentioned frequently at staff meetings and given extensive attention in practice, as well as in the fieldnote above. More broadly, these practices nod to a ‘monitoring’ culture which ‘employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change’ on both settings and individual workers and is part of the broader package of neoliberal reforms in education ‘carried’ by global bodies and increasingly taken up in the UK (Ball, 2003, p.216).

Beyond the early years sector, ‘austerity Britain’ measures were in full operation, following the global financial crisis in 2007-2008 and continuing decades of similar fiscal prescriptions placed on the ‘Third World/South’ by the IMF/World Bank. In Britain, however, these measures have been voluntarily taken up as a ‘virtuous necessity’, Clarke (2013) points out, and have included funding cuts for public services and the restructuring of services as far ranging as health, education, and the criminal justice

²⁵ Nursery World magazine (<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/>) provides an on-going catalogue and critique of changes to early years policy under the Coalition government.

system through processes such as marketisation or ‘market-mimicking’, contracting out, and the promotion of entrepreneurialism. Without seeking to hark back to a mythical golden age of the welfare state or more specifically an idealised view of New Labour early childhood policy, it is important to note the way the financial crisis was ‘reworked’ in the UK in a manner which apportioned blame on the welfare state rather than ‘high risk strategies of banks’ (Clarke and Newman, 2012, p.300).

As part of this austerity ‘reworking’, national funding for Children’s Centres was cut by 11% in October 2010 (Phillips, 2011) and protection for the remaining funding was also removed as funding was combined for all children, youth, and family services, including the new two-year-old places, in the Early Intervention Grant (EIG) (DfE, 2012b). In the context of the ‘austerity drive’ and cuts to children’s services, argues Gillies (2013, p.8), the embracing of pseudo-neurological research was not accidental: it ‘facilitated and bolstered a very specific focus on early years intervention as an evidenced, bounded and very cost limited policy approach’. Essentially, the EIG pitted the needs of various children and young people against each other as local authorities were left to juggle funding decisions, including about the fate of Children’s Centres as the move from the Sure Start model was accompanied by re-scaling of the programme from the national to local (Lewis, 2010). In the borough where Westside Nursery is located, over a million pounds was cut from children’s services in the first year after ring-fencing around funding was removed (Defries, 2011).

Eva, the Head of Centre, linked these cuts and more general austerity measures to shifts in the types of children able to access Westside Nursery. She noted that the threshold for receiving ‘Children in Need’ places had increased substantially, meaning that those children who were able to access the funding were dealing with increased challenges both in relation to emotional and physical vulnerabilities and special educational needs:

‘We’ve seen some really high levels of need amongst those families in the ‘Children in Need’ places and that takes up a lot more time. Like we’ve got three children in care. I can remember one child in care a few years ago. But we’ve got so many now. And children with child protection plans. Because the threshold is so much higher now.’

(Interview, 12th July 2012)

Returning to the fieldnote which began this section, the educators’ references to increased challenges facing children entering the setting can be better understood within this context as it points to a qualitative shift in the lives of local families generally as well as those who were able to access the setting. Rather than considering the

increasing hardships facing families in the light of neo-liberal and austerity measures, however, the educators' comments cited 'medicalised discourses of damage and disorder' (Gillies, 2013, p.13). The 'biologisation of poverty' and achievement, suggests Gillies (2013, p.17), is effectively realised through the recourse to (inaccurate) neurology as justification for particular forms of early intervention. Conflating biology, or culture, and success runs the risk of misrepresenting and potentially pathologising young children who do not seem to 'fit' within particular environments and significantly it deflects attention from enduring inequalities.

At the same time, developments at the global scale, articulating with those at the national and local, produced a highly pressured environment. The climate of monitoring and accountability where, regardless of wide-ranging enduring inequalities, settings and educators are tasked with supporting children to meet prescriptive developmental outcomes (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) and be 'school ready' (DfE, 2012a) can help to contextualise some of the stress expressed by the educators. This is particularly the case when coupled with budgetary cuts and marketised competition. The above mentioned factors also impacted on practices related to death/violence play, and it is to a more specific focus on the sociospatial relations of death/violence play in Westside Nursery that I move to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5:

Death/violence play and double-voiced practices

The previous chapter began the process of situating Westside Nursery in terms of sociospatial relations, offering a general account of the setting with respect to early childhood policy, funding, and knowledge production at global, national, and local scales as well as the organisation of physical and social space through practices of territorialising and boundarying. Building on this broader contextualising, the present chapter will offer a more specific account of death/violence play at Westside Nursery tracing the interactions between discourses about death/violence play and childhood; policy imperatives in the early childhood sector; and material conditions, including the sociospatial relations amongst the educators and children, groups which are in themselves diverse rather than homogenous. Bakhtin (1986) might refer to the way utterances and practices are 'populated' with a range of ideological positions and social relations as 'double-voicedness'. Here, I will argue that these heterogeneous, and even contradictory, material and discursive constellations interacted in complex and unpredictable ways which in part accounts for the ambivalent reception given to death/violence play at Westside Nursery. At the same time, particular 'flows'²⁶ came to dominate in the setting and this chapter will consider both the potential reasons for and resultant implications of this path-dependence. In so doing, this chapter will primarily work through one critical moment; however, it will also draw upon broader themes identified through the coding process.

5.1 Vicious dogs, monsters, and healing medicine

Kaltrina and Nasra had initiated a game of peekaboo with me in the central part of the outdoor area when Abdul approached: growling, barking, and pulling on my pants with his teeth. 'I'm a friendly dog,' he said between snarls. 'Come. The jungle,' he continued, pulling me towards the treed area. Taking up the narrative, Kaltrina pointed into the distance behind us and shrieked: 'A monster! Hide in my house!' As we began running to the jungle-house, Nasra intervened bravely: 'I'll get a gun and kill it,' skipping off to look for a gun before joining us in the jungle-house.

Once inside the jungle-house, the 'doorbell' at the bottom of the muddy hill started ringing. Kaltrina ran to open the 'door' and many more children came in seeking refuge from the monster. Settled in safely, Maribel's eyes suddenly rolled back in her head until her lids fluttered closed and she slithered to the

²⁶ The use of the term 'flow' makes reference to another aspect of the multidimensional sociospatial approach. 'Flow', as it is used in network analysis, refers to the complex and fluid interconnections between people, animals, machines, resources, spaces, policies, and discourses operating at multiple scalar levels (Sheppard, 2002).

ground on top of my crouched body. 'I'm dead,' she whispered, lying motionless.

'Help!' I cried. 'She's dead! What should we do?' Nasra responded shyly, 'I'll be the doctor,' mixing potions and giving Maribel injections. But Maribel didn't move and didn't blink. Mark came roaring in with an ambulance siren blaring and set to work on Maribel. Nonetheless, he couldn't revive her either.

Seeing the action, Tanveer fell to the ground crying, 'I'm dying. I'm dying.' Peter and Nandan soon followed, sliding to the ground in 'death position'. Abdul-dog rushed over on his hands and knees growling, puffing, and bearing down on Tanveer. 'Hey,' shouted Tanveer angrily, pushing the dog off. Abdul-dog whimpered and rubbed against my leg. 'What happened, doggie?' I asked. 'My fire makes them better,' he replied plaintively, referring to his hot fiery breath. 'Do they know that?' I queried. Abdul-dog rushed over to Tanveer to explain. Tanveer relented: 'Ok, just a small one.' Unsatisfied, Abdul-dog asserted, 'No, big one,' continuing to huff and puff his healing breath. Tanveer rolled over and got up, moving away from the fire-breathing dog.

'What should we do?' I asked, surveying the 'dead bodies' lying on the ground. 'Medicine,' replied Nasra-doctor, pointing to a small gated area next to the jungle-house, as usual locked and piled with equipment, 'Down here.' Abdul, Nasra, Kaltrina, and Mark trooped down, on the search for medicine to fix their compatriots.

'Wait,' yelled Abdul, transformed from dog to healer, 'The dogs have it!' He ran ahead, pointing to the 'wild dogs' behind the locked gate. Waiting in front of the gate with his arms out-stretched, Abdul-healer declared: 'Stand back girls,' to the group of children as if to say 'Don't worry. I'll take care of these vicious dogs and get the medicine.'

Nasra was having none of this, however, and retorted: 'I want to get the medicine.' She attempted to push Abdul to the side. 'I'll protect you,' replied Abdul, pushing Nasra back with his outstretched arms, 'Don't want the dogs to bite.' Ignoring him, Nasra grabbed the medicine from behind the gate and the group of children returned to their jungle-home to revive the dead and dying.

(Fieldnote, 9th May 2011)

Whilst this critical moment is not intended to be representative of all death/violence play at Westside Nursery, it offers a way into discussion of many of the practices related to death/violence play. This fieldnote also allows for consideration of responses to death/violence play amongst educators in Westside Nursery as I used it as a prompt in two educator interviews (prior to the decision not to share fieldnotes about specific children with educators, as discussed in Chapter 3.) The following interview excerpt took place after Adriana, one of the educators, read the above fieldnote:

Rachel: What are your thoughts in response to this observation? Were you surprised by anything or was it what you'd expect?

Adriana: It's quite a while ago. Abdul is having a bit of trouble at the moment. It's nice play from Abdul. He developed it a bit with you supporting him to develop it. Cause he is quite likely to just be the dog: growl and bark and chase.

Then he'll kind of go off. 3-4 minutes later he'll come back and the other children will scream and run around and he'll chase them. And that's kind of the extent of it. So it's a sort of play that won't take beyond chasing.

He was a dog for weeks. He was actually in role as a dog so much so that his mom was concerned. He'd pant with his tongue out and he'd be down on all fours and he ... he was a dog...He must have gone through months... a good four weeks if not longer of really being in dog role....To unpick it and look deeper at it, it was probably a time when he didn't have so much language, you know English, available to him. That maybe it was a way of interacting and getting quite a nice response. Patted, being taken care of. He would bark a bit, but he was quite an even-tempered dog.

Partly I think over a long time, we've been reminding him to use his words and say what he wants and doesn't want. It's nice that's he's used quite a lot of language here and that our efforts have had an effect. Because they often don't pay attention to him....

He's not particularly flexible. He wants things to go his way. If the other children don't do exactly what he wants... Here they kind of did what he said. Apart from Nasra. But Nasra's probably quite easy to [can't hear recording]...

Rachel: In that situation, she was not taking 'no'.

Adriana: He finds that quite difficult when things don't his way.

Rachel: He says, 'Stand back girls'...

Adriana: I can imagine him doing that... I think he needed the situation... He needed to have the sort of courage to do that in a way. To speak that much. I think within that whole kind of game play, and supported by an adult there, kind of gave him... I can picture him doing it. I think that's how he'd like to be seen. As sort of a protector. Centre of attention kind of moment.

(Interview, 11th July 2011)

In analysing these two interrelated moments, I will highlight three interconnected flows: the presence and meanings of death in play; the relationships between symbolic, physical, everyday, and fantasy violence; and, the citations re-contextualised in the narrative. These are not the only themes which can be traced from these pieces of data; they did, however, come to occupy a central place in this study as a way of making sense of perspectives and practices related to death/violence play in Westside Nursery.

5.2 An absent presence: death, play, and early childhood

In placing this fieldnote in conversation with the interview transcript, it is striking to note the difference in the attention given to the motif of death. In the fieldnote, dying and death comprise a substantial portion of the narrative and are the basis of interactions between many different children. By way of contrast, dying and death were noticeable

in their absence in the interview transcript, not mentioned by Adriana once during the discussion of the fieldnote. It is possible that her attention was on Abdul, one of her 'key children', and this led her to focus otherwise given that he did not 'die' in the narrative; however, his interactions with others were certainly prompted by such events. This divergence exemplifies what I will go to characterise as the 'absent presence' of ludic death in Westside Nursery.

5.2.1 The use of death as a generative metaphor

Ludic death was a common occurrence during this ethnography, observed nearly every day when I was at the setting. Similar to the events in the 'jungle-house', the act of ludic dying was often contagious: one death led to another and often mass deaths ensued. Indeed, Maribel's death, like the others which followed, was not provoked or caused by any apparent development in the narrative and ludic activity which might be expected to cause death, for example storylines involving weapon fights, did not result in death at Westside Nursery. Instead, mortality was consistently self-proclaimed.

Dying and death were often represented in an embodied manner, similar to the description of Maribel's closed eyes and flat, motionless body. On other occasions, children would extend their arms and legs, or stick their tongue out of the side of their mouth. This physical caricature seemed to be a recognised symbol in the peer culture, only occasionally explained by a brief statement as with Maribel's explanation (*'I'm dead!'*) or Tanveer's more active proclamation (*'I'm dying!'*). At other times, no verbal pronouncement was made in connection with the embodied action, but another child in the setting would explain or respond as if a 'death' had occurred.

In this critical moment, there were a variety of responses to the 'death' of a child player. With the assistance of others, Nasra and Mark attempted medicalised interventions using pharmaceuticals and injections. Abdul relied on a form of magic: hot and fiery dog breath. Magic and medical interventions – including CPR – were often used in revivals, but at other times in the ethnographic study children used kisses, tickles, and physical prodding. Some deaths, as with Peter and Nandan, were ignored and these I will return to below.

Dying and death did not hold any sense of permanence in the play: it was treated as a reversible process. It was often momentary in everyday time and was unaccompanied by symbols in the ludic narrative suggesting that it was anything but temporary although some children did remain dead for longer periods as in Maribel's prolonged 10 minute death. The only exception here was that death was occasionally permanent for

a ludic character: a 'goodie' character might be discarded through the act of dying in order to take up another character such as a zombie. Perhaps in keeping with the lack of permanence accorded to death, dying was never marked by any kind of ritual of mourning, such as covering the body, funeral, or expression of grief, with the exception of one child who 'cried' at a death scene and was observed with concern by the other players.

When asked specifically about these characteristics in the children's death play, many educators made recourse to arguments within developmental psychology with comments such as: '*Is it about their age? Not having a correct understanding of death...*' Developmental theories suggest that many children under five are unable to understand that death is final and irreversible, inevitable for all living things, and has a cause. These (mis)understandings, it is argued, are linked to developmental immaturity, specifically an inability to think abstractly where 'fuzzy logic' is accordingly supplemented with fantasy (e.g. see Cox, Garrett and Graham, 2004/2005 for an example of this argument). Such analysis would appear to be borne out by the apparently causeless and reversible deaths of Maribel, Tanveer, Peter, and Nandan.

This literal account of death in the ludic is also put forward in much of the broader early childhood literature: children's play about death is often understood as a mode of meaning making about mortality (Löfdahl, 2005) or as a form of catharsis for dealing with fears, including about death, in the everyday world (Goldstein, 1995; Holland, 2003). Educators also drew on such arguments making comments such as: '*This play allows them to sort out their feelings about death.*' In these accounts, dying and death in play are viewed as having a direct and even transparent correspondence to dying and death in the everyday world; indeed they are considered to be fundamentally about dying and death.

Certainly, such play may allow for catharsis and meaning-making, a possibility not dismissed in this thesis, although this is by no means assured. More significantly, however, literal interpretations of children's death/violence play run the risk of substantiating a deficit view of childhood, as highlighted above, on the basis of imaginative activity. If play, however, is the enactment of movable meanings which reconfigure the world in new ways (see Chapter 2), then the use of 'death' in play can perhaps best be understood figuratively. As a contestive assertion into the social world death/violence play can be examined, not solely or even primarily for its literal implications of children's developmental levels or emotional concerns, but for the conditions of possibility it produces in players' on-going engagements with others.

Whilst the use of death in play makes reference to death outside of the play, the meanings it is given in the ludic rather than the everyday world assume importance.

At the level of peer culture, ludic death at Westside Nursery, I suggest, came to assume the status of a 'generative metaphor', following Schön (1993). He considers the way underlying 'stories' frame social dilemmas in particular ways and thereby generate particular 'solutions'. Primarily considering generative metaphors in relation to social policy, he offers the example of poor, inner-city communities, arguing that framing of the issue in terms of urban 'blight' prompts policy rooted in the concept of 'disease' and 'cure'; although, he notes that generative metaphors can also result in positive innovations. Generative metaphors are 'triggered' through intense and even embodied engagements where the characteristics of one phenomena or object are loosely 'mapped' on to the other. Bringing the features of one phenomena into conversation with another prompts entirely 'new perceptions, explanations, and inventions' (Schön, 1993, p.142).

In the case of the above fieldnote, Maribel's initial death can be viewed as a metaphor for a series of 'problems' encountered in the ludic activity. Here, it is relevant that her use of the death trope was not an obvious part of the on-going narrative and there was no problem within the narrative which seemed to cause her death. She did, however, face a series of significant challenges: she had not yet established a role for herself in the in-process play. Her position, continued participation, and level of influence over the narrative were relatively uncertain. Indeed, 'death' was often used in moments of particular uncertainty such as initiation of play interactions or power struggles over narrative developments.

The death trope became a relatively stable symbol called up some children in the setting and was widely recognised by others. When mapped on to other 'problems' encountered in the ludic activity, 'death' offered the hope of a particular solution to problems of uncertainty in entering and influencing the play. Similar to the everyday world, dying and death was often productive of sustained emotional and physical attentions to the 'corpse' resulting in its incorporation into the play narrative. In this case, Maribel's death prompted the ministrations of both Nasra and Mark. Even more, when death was responded to at Westside Nursery it generated a pivot or shift in the storyline allowing the dying player to exert a particular form of influence over the direction of the play narrative. In the case of Maribel, her continued death produced a narrative of collective exploration and quest for medicine to revive her which was not present prior to her use of the trope. This was a narrative which occupied others for some time and ensured Maribel a central role in the play.

Although it is less apparent in the critical moment, it is important to point out that use of the death trope was not always generative. Its impact and influence was often based on the position of the player within the setting: Peter²⁷ and Nandan's bodies, for instance, were left lying on the ground as the play moved on around them. As in the everyday world, some deaths were regarded as particularly emotive whilst others were overlooked, little more than collateral damage. Beyond the implications for the reproduction of inequitable social relations, this testifies to the lack of predictability of meanings and acts in play. This relationship between power, inequalities, and the use of and responses to death as a generative metaphor will be taken up again in Chapter 7.

5.2.2 The absence of death

In contrast to the ubiquity of dying/death in the imaginative play at Westside Nursery, reference to the death trope was largely absent in educators' accounts and practices. Educators generally did not mention ludic deaths, as in the case of the interview with Adriana above, unless specifically asked. Observations of deaths in play were not mentioned at planning meetings and, as a result, were not recorded in the tracking sheets or children's profile books. This absence in official documentation may have signified a lack of concern rather than an effort to omit 'dying/death' from the setting. A number of other factors, however, suggest a more complex relationship to ludic deaths. Educators occasionally joined in play with children when they had 'died'; however, their interventions were such that the death trope was left unacknowledged. By way of example, Rebecca approached a child in death position and began to tickle her wildly, laughing: *'Wake up! I'm going to wake you up!* The children's responses to an educator's presence during their 'deaths' were also suggestive: many appeared to anticipate that their deaths were somehow inappropriate or unwanted:

Peter lay 'dead' on the ground as an educator walked by questioning: 'What are you doing Peter?' He immediately got up off the ground, keeping his eye on her. Once she had passed and moved away towards the climbers, he 're-died' and the play continued.

(Fieldnote, 5th October 2011)

²⁷ Peter's position in the setting was complicated. In the first year of the research, he was often excluded from children's friendship groupings told at one point that he was 'too dirty' to join, in what seemed to be an implicitly racist comment issued by a White child to Peter, a Black Caribbean-British boy. As will become apparent throughout the thesis, Peter's position in the setting remained ambivalent and subject to racist assumptions; although, his status did appear to increase possibly due to his increasing association with Paul, a high status White boy.

The absence of death in educator narratives and observed practices can be explained by three interconnected factors. First, whilst the extent to which death taboos exist in advanced capitalist countries – in which ‘death is prejudged as a “pornographic” event that should be veiled’ (Lee, 2008, p.745) – continues to be a subject of debate amongst sociologists (e.g. Arnason and Hafsteinsson, 2003), there does seem to be agreement that death and dying have been increasingly sequestered or moved from people’s homes and daily lives to be managed by professionals within civil institutions. Children in particular are often sheltered from death and dying (Stanley and Wise, 2011), indicating that while taboos on death may be generally lifting they take on specific resonances as they collide with particular conceptions of childhood.

Death and sexuality are two bodies of knowledge which are considered particularly ‘difficult’ for children, leading Robinson (2013, p.23) to argue: ‘There is a prevailing perception that children should be sheltered from this knowledge for as long as possible in order to avoid any stress or trauma that might be associated with *premature* access to this information.’ Here, ‘adult imaginaries’ (Taylor, 2011) about childhood as a time of innocence not to be sullied by the harsh realities of the world come into play. Indeed, constructions of childhood as a ‘golden age’ of innocence, according to Dahlberg *et al.* (2007, p.45), are often productive of pedagogical environments that focus on ‘protection, continuity, and security’. It is perhaps this sense of innocence which Kelly, an educator, was grappling with when she noted her discomfort in engaging in play which might lead to a ludic death: *‘I don't think that's a conscious decision. But that would feel uncomfortable. I suppose because everything you're doing is to protect and look after children.’*

What is viewed as problematic or off-limits knowledge for children often relates to those areas of life which adults find the most difficult, argues Robinson (2013). Whilst the ludic deaths were only symbolic, it is possible that the death trope raised troubling issues for adult educators. Child deaths in the everyday world are viewed as a particularly intolerable tragedy: a study conducted by the Association of Children’s Hospices, for example, found that ‘one in four people in Britain find anything to do with children’s illness or childhood death too upsetting to talk about’ (Community Care, 2005). The increasing sacralisation of children’s lives in particular is best understood in relation to children’s changing position in relation to the economy, argues Zelizer (1994), where children came to be viewed as ‘economically worthless’ but ‘emotionally priceless’. She notes the shifts in mourning practices in 19th century Europe and North America, from resigned acceptance to pronounced outpourings of grief, which predate

reductions in infant mortality which were a result of advances in medicine, hygiene, and diet amongst other factors.

Perhaps, then, the absent presence of death in educator narratives and practices can be understood as embedded in a more general cultural consensus about the cherished sentimental worth of childhood and the policy mandate for protecting children (see below for further discussion of safety and risk) and supporting happy childhoods. Indeed, the corollary of protecting the purity of childhood from the corruption and harshness of the 'adult world' is that childhood, and the territories in which childhood is segregated, are often romanticised as 'happy' spatial-temporal sites (Boyden, 1997). Here, adults are tasked with maintaining idealised childhoods – virtually enforcing a form of 'compulsory happiness'. Teaching children to 'regulate' emotions, particularly those which are seen to contrast with happiness, is emphasised in parenting literature (Hoffman, 2009) as well as texts for early childhood educators (e.g. Holland, 2009). In seeking to encourage desired behaviours, the use of 'fun' and 'happy' language is suggested (Hoffman, 2009). The preoccupation with 'happiness' has also taken hold more broadly in some streams of 'positive psychology', compulsory education, and the public imaginary, argues Binkley (2011), to the extent that happiness is increasingly viewed as something that can be both measured and taught (Suissa, 2008). Happiness, on this account, is related to individual attitude, denying the impact of social inequalities on people's well-being, and is often conflated with a lack of conflict negating the fruitfulness of dissensus or deliberation of challenging issues (Suissa, 2008). In this context, troubling themes and imagery, such as death tropes, come to seem decidedly out of place in early childhood settings intent on ensuring 'a secure, safe and happy childhood' (DCSF, 2008b, p.7) or indeed in relation to play which is often characterised as 'fun' and 'pleasurable' (Fromberg, 2002; for a critical perspective see Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010).

5.3 Violence in play

Whilst the previous section considered the place and meaning of ludic death in the practices and accounts of educators and children, this section seeks to situate violent themes in play at Westside Nursery, arguing that competing policy imperatives and sociospatial relations led to ambivalent and contradictory responses to 'violence in play'.

The title of this section is left intentionally ambiguous: Does it refer to tropes of violence or 'actual' violence during ludic activity? What does the term 'violence' refer to: physical acts or also acts of symbolic and psychological aggression? Unlike play involving death

tropes, which were obviously symbolic as opposed to actual events of mortality, violence in play was not as easily distinguished as belonging to the ludic or everyday worlds. Returning to the fieldnote above by way of example, was the physical conflict between Nasra and Abdul over the retrieval of the medicine part of a ludic narrative, a clash between characters, or was it part of the everyday negotiation taking place between Nasra and Abdul for influence over the storyline? Even Nasra's procurement of a gun to kill the monster complicates the question of violence. Whilst it certainly took place in the ludic realm, with both gun and monster existing only as fantasy in the minds of players, were her actions linked in any way to Nasra's everyday world being or her approach to situations of conflict? In other words, was Nasra more likely than other children, for example Kaltrina, to respond to everyday challenges with violence? Did the use of violent tropes in play naturalise the use of aggression in the everyday world? Also complicating this moment was the relationship between physical and symbolic violence. Abdul's statement ('*Stand back girls!*') and the others that followed were intent upon securing the centrality of his position in procuring the medicine from the grip of vicious dogs. It is notable that in seeking this role, Abdul used a gendered reference, despite the fact that boys and girls were present. The force of his 'double-voiced' citation drew largely on patriarchal and middle-class discourses which constitute girls and women as essentially weak and in need of a male saviour. In this sense, Abdul's act can be considered an act of symbolic violence. The status of this symbolic violence was also unclear, however: Was it an act contained within the ludic narrative or an act in the everyday world and what are the implications of such distinctions? In many ways, the questions posed here form the heart of this thesis and as such they will not be answered directly at this point. They are raised at this stage to point to the complexity of 'violence in play' and to provide an opening for considering the discursive and material flows surrounding the critical moment which began the chapter.

5.3.1 The use of violence in ludic activity

To begin, a few brief comments will help to situate the critical moment which began the chapter in relation to other violently-themed play at Westside Nursery. Physical violence in the ludic activity at Westside Nursery was sometimes directed at an imagined foe, as in the case of the monster above, and sometimes at a character who was physically present in the play, as in the case of the altercation between Abdul and Nasra. In some cases this involved actual touch, somewhere along a continuum ranging from 'rough and tumble play' to 'actual' fighting. A body of literature on

children's 'rough and tumble' play suggests that it can be distinguished from physical aggression through the use of indicators such as laughter, smiles, and a 'play face'; self-handicapping; and, the absence of intent to hurt co-players (e.g. Reed and Brown, 2000). The precision of such a binary distinction is difficult to uphold, however, as it suggests that not only are intentions transparent and knowable to the self but they are to onlookers as well. At Westside Nursery, there certainly did not seem to be such a clear bifurcation between thematic and actual aggression, as play that may have originally been defined as 'rough and tumble' according to the above definition would shift into physical interaction with the seeming intent to hurt another or combined this seeming intent with laughter and other 'indicators' that it was only play. At other times, ludic violence was more obviously staged, as two or more children would move their bodies in roughly choreographed fighting moves without touching. In some moments, as in the case of the monster in the fieldnote above, violence was only predicted and the narrative involved running, hiding, and various other forms of anticipatory self-protection.

Regardless of whether touch was involved, violent acts were primarily expressed corporeally, but they were occasionally verbalised through ludic dialogue or extra-play descriptions (such as *'Now, I'm going to tie up the monster'*). Embodiments involved combinations of stylised actions such as martial arts moves and wand-waving; poses such as finger pointing and puffed chests; movement such as charging and stealth attacks; sounds; and, interaction with the physical spaces such as hiding and climbing. Children often made use solely of the body to symbolise weapons and superpowers although props, such as blocks for guns and sticks for swords or wands, and costumes, such as capes or weaponised watches, were also used. These tended to be fairly minimalist and expedient: preparing for imaginary play was generally eschewed for actual engagement.

5.3.2 'Gun play' as a signifier in educator narratives and policy

Unlike the relative absence of death, violence – both fantastical tropes and everyday manifestations – occupied much of the educators' narratives about the topic of study. The use of imaginary guns saturated these accounts, with concerns and questions about violently-themed play crystallising in this symbol. The term 'gun play' became a signifier for a loose grouping of play which involved thematic-aggression – an emic term amongst educators for what is referred to in this thesis as death/violence play. By way of exemplification, in the first set of interviews I conducted with educators, I asked about their thoughts about play involving themes of death and violence. Despite the

openness of this question, five out of nine educators responded immediately about play involving guns and two others focused specifically on weapon play suggesting that a well-rehearsed discourse involved linking death and violence themes specifically with gun play.

Explicit policies in the setting related to death/violence play can be seen in the context of the broad use of the signifier 'gun play'. Eva, the Head, traced this evolving policy in relation to her own career:

In 1999, when I first joined the staff as a supply teacher there was a 'no guns' policy.

When I returned in 2003, gun play was happening amongst the children. Different teachers responded differently to the play. There was no consistent implementation of the policy.

The team reviewed the policy in 2004. There was a general reluctance to support, encourage, and allow gun play, but they recognised that children were doing it anyway. We decided that we would allow it, but the rule was that children had to make the guns themselves at the construction table. They couldn't just use their hands, sticks, or Lego – that sort of thing.

In 2008-9, gun play started happening more and became a part of the general play in the setting. I get involved in the play, and another teacher who has left did as well, but the others less so. Occasionally, the team has made a decision to have adults involved in the play to extend it, but this depends on the teachers' comfort level and other programming needs.

Even though we allow it now... I think that some of the staff would be much happier to ban it altogether.

(Interview, 13th June 2011)

This narrative about gun play policy was relatively consistent amongst the educators, with all educators agreeing that the play would happen regardless of any setting policy and confirming that it was now officially permitted in the setting. In tracing the different rationales and elaborations offered in relation to this policy evolution, a constellation of material and ideological discourses operating both within and beyond the porous territory of Westside Nursery become apparent and it is to these that the chapter moves now.

5.3.3 The child as 'animal' in need of civilising

With respect to the evolution of 'gun play' policy in Westside Nursery, one of the explanations offered came from Tashelle:

We decided that if gun play was done as an activity it wouldn't get as out of hand as if it was done in secret areas because adults could guide in terms of safety, encourage 'nicer play' and negotiation. Before it was allowed, children with stronger personalities would bully or be scary for others in gun play.

(Interview, 11th July 2011)

Her comments indicate a sense of concern and commitment to children in her care. Whilst she does not explicitly reference a specific incident involving 'bullying' it is possible that her comment was informed by the memory of such incidents. In no way seeking to downplay these genuine concerns for the safety and well-being of children at Westside Nursery, I suggest that Tashelle's comments can also be understood as operating at another level. These comments call up a conception of the child – or at least those with '*stronger personalities*' – as dangerous and uncontrolled without the support, stability, and indeed judicial boundary-setting which can – within this narrative – only be offered by adults. Traces of the savage or feral were carried in other educator comments, such as '*the children move in a pack*', '*it can be frenzied*', '*the play is uncontained*', and '*it is gang culture already*'.

Conceptions of children as savage 'animals' (Mills, 2000) have deep historical roots in puritanical views which construed childhood as rooted in original sin (Valentine, 1996) and the ideas of 17th century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, for whom childhood was a state of 'being as yet unschooled and untamed' (Spry, 2013, p.6). Whilst recognising the historical longevity of these views of childhood, Valentine (1996, p.588) notes that they are instantiated with different spatial-temporal inflections, arguing that in the contemporary period the 1993 murder of toddler Jamie Bulger by two young boys, 'shattered the dominant contemporary imagining of children – that they possess a special nature (pure, innocent, vulnerable, tender, etc)...'. She notes the way a 'moral panic' was generated in the UK through excessive and sensationalist media coverage, effectively 'demonising' childhood – at least in relation to children of 'other people'. Whilst murder does not figure in Tashelle's explanation of policy at Westside Nursery, there is a rehearsal of this particular formulation of 'the child' as a danger, either literally through '*bullying*' or by subjecting those who are more vulnerable to excessively '*scary*' play. In one way, the 'child as animal' is similar to the 'innocent child' in that both position childhood in close affinity to nature with such enduring ubiquity as to be entirely 'unremarkable' (Taylor, 2011, p.424). In contrast, however, views of the child as 'dangerous' serve to justify efforts to bring childhood under the firm hand of adulthood or else risk the fatal outcomes, exemplified in literature such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. On this view, childhood is only 'redeemable'

through the actions of civilised adults, including via disciplinary measures (Leavitt and Power, 1997).

In many ways, Adriana's comment in the opening interview (*'It's quite a while ago. Abdul is having a bit of trouble at the moment. It's nice play from Abdul.'*) can be better understood in light of these narratives of childhood. At the time of this interview, Abdul's play practices were a subject of repeated discussion amongst many of the educators, particularly Adriana, with concerns resonating strongly with conceptions of the 'child as animal'. Educators expressed worries to me directly, to the Head, and at staff meetings that he was: *'disruptive'*, *'didn't know how to stop'*, and would often get *'riled up'* by imaginative play. Elaborating on these concerns in an interview, Tashelle commented on Abdul's death/violence play:

Abdul does not know physical boundaries. He cannot stop himself. This play has affected him. It has brought these issues to the forefront as this behaviour was in his system. But no adult is available to help him learn to stop – he cannot stop himself.

(Interview, 11th July 2011)

Underpinning these views are fears about the long-term negative consequences of death/violence play which suggest that allowing it in an unrestrained form normalises violence as a basis for interaction and conflict 'resolution'. As Kelly commented in an interview in reference to other educators at the setting:

I know some people worry about gun crime and knife crime and they're like if you let them play this kind of thing then it's going to lead to them doing it or thinking that's ok somehow.

(Interview, 11th July 2011)

Holland (2003) traces these fears back to the very real concerns about violence emerging from the 1970s and 1980s Peace Movement and Women's Movement, particularly grassroots activism against male violence against women at both domestic and systemic levels. Without proper efforts to address and control natural and 'uncivilised' instincts, the argument runs, it is feared that adulthood will be fraught with instinctual remnants of childhood past. Indeed, a number of experimental studies have sought to prove the hypothesis that thematically-violent play leads to increased aggression in both the short and long term (Turner and Goldsmith, 1976; Watson and Peng, 1992, as cited in Goldstein, 1995; Levin, 2006; Sanson and Muccio, 1993). As noted in Chapter 1, attempts at empirically documenting assertions that aggressively-themed play is a source of violent adult behaviour have proved elusive. Studies looking for causal links between death/violence play and later aggression have been critiqued

for methodological reasons such as variable and/or indeterminate definitions of aggression and non-naturalistic methods (Goldstein, 1995); other studies have provided conflicting evidence (e.g. Parsons and Howe, 2006).

Returning to the interview with Adriana, in contrast to the contemporaneous concerns about Abdul's 'disruptive' play, Adriana indicated her pleasure in Abdul's play practices in the fieldnote from the previous month. She particularly noted his use of language and ability to develop narrative storylines, characteristics frequently identified with 'civilised' behaviour. Her comments are not only reflective of a particular way of thinking about the 'civilising' of childhood, however, but were linked to the specific educator responsibilities enshrined within the curriculum. Under statutory guidance, educators were tasked to help children to 'progress' to pre-set and standardised early learning goals by the end of the Foundation Stage including:

- Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.
- Enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.
- Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.
(DCSF, 2008b, p.13)

Seen in this context, Adriana's emphasis on Abdul's use of English holds particular salience as the inspection system in England (conducted by OfSTED) includes regulation and public reporting of setting outcomes in relation to early learning goals. In the competitive, market-based early years sector, such an inspection regime inevitably informs and shapes those aspects of practice and children's development which are given attention and value.

At play here is the dominant view that early years settings have a responsibility to ensure 'school readiness', effectively serving as a 'civilising' force between an assumed natural infant/child and a student prepared for the demands of more formal, compulsory schooling and even as a member of a "stable, well-prepared" workforce for the future' (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007, p.45). Whilst an explicit link was made between the original EYFS and children's 'learning throughout their school years' (DCSF, 2008b, p.10), school readiness became more pronounced in the Coalition government's early years programme, with the Department for Education (2010) announcing that it sought to 'shift the focus to getting children ready for education'. This preoccupation plays across national scales, with the OECD (2006, p.219) pointing out: 'In the early childhood field, an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school is increasingly heard.' Concerns about such a prescriptive emphasis were also voiced by some of the educators:

I do tear my hair out, doing the reviews with children and seeing the number of targets. I don't like that term. And the number that are around recognising numbers.... Let's do something else...I think there's been a shift perhaps because of the single point of entry, the school readiness thing. You don't often see something around imagination. Unless it's a child who finds that pretending is difficult and then you're talking really basic pretend. Sometimes something about storying, but that's much more acceptable isn't it?

(Eva, Interview, 12th July 2011)

The point here is not to criticise educators for their concerns about supporting children's relationships and communication, or indeed their efforts to create respectful communities by any means. What is at stake, however, is the way children's activities become subjected to teleological progress narratives which assume the possibility of predictability and unquestioned desirability of particular characteristics and knowledges associated with 'civilised' adulthood (cf Moss, 2013). Individual children can become pathologised, with all of their practices interpreted through a lens of savagery, particularly in play moments where narratives are often left un-verbalised. Such practices can, as James *et al.* (1998) point out, reinforce generational inequities as those behaviours associated with the 'proper adult' are normalised, relegating other practices and supposedly 'uncivilised' children to a lesser status. In sum, this section has suggested that a constellation of civilising narratives about childhood and related policy imperatives emphasising school readiness circulated in educator responses to death/violence play.

5.3.4 The vulnerable child, risk, and surplus safety

The corollary of concerns about the child as dangerous to others is a view of the child as vulnerable, in need of protection from 'bullying' and indeed other perils which may be encountered during death/violence play. In Westside Nursery, anxieties about children's vulnerability in death/violence play were related to fears about both emotional and physical dangers: from the environment, other children, or even unknown sources, as Tashelle's comments above imply.

Just as 'civilising' the child falls to the adult, the association of vulnerability with childhood necessitates adult responsibility for protecting children and childhood. As noted in Chapter 2, the biological vulnerability of infants has often been extended to all children (Mayall, 2004) to the point that Christensen (2000) argues that vulnerability has become a 'master identity' of childhood. Indeed, the 'vulnerable child' and the vulnerability of childhood is a repeated trope in media coverage of phenomena as diverse as child labour, war, and abduction, Mills (2000) argues, and in popular and

academic literature as denoted by titles such as *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman, 1994).²⁸

The conflation of childhood and vulnerability is compounded by the intensification of a 'risk society' seen to be full of often invisible threats due to increasing fragmentation and social change. Drawing on this influential thesis put forward by Ulrich Beck, Bialostok and Kamberelis (2010, p.301) point out that 'risk discourses have become pervasive' in early childhood settings. On one hand, these risk discourses valorise 'managed' risk-taking in activities ranging from literacy to outdoor play. Whilst the educators at Westside Nursery did not cite discourses of 'risk taking' directly, they did make efforts to create physically challenging outdoor activities such as high climbing structures and obstacle courses. In effect, the outdoor environment was set-up following the principles of an oft-cited educator text: 'A safe environment, I would argue, is one where safety is not seen as safety from all possible harm, but offers safety to explore, experiment, try things out and to take risks' (Tovey, 2007, p.100). These 'risky' physical spaces were often used in children's death/violence play, offering affordances in keeping with the perilous aspects of play narratives: a climbing frame was turned into a jail where the monster trapped and cooked its prisoners and a rope – possibly intended by educators as an aid for swinging or climbing– became a noose in a series of ludic executions by hanging.

On the other hand, by highlighting multiple, often imperceptible threats, risk discourses amplify concerns about safety particularly when elided with constructions of childhood vulnerability. In navigating the tension between promoting 'risk-taking' and ensuring 'safety', the educators at Westside Nursery generally planned and set-up activities aimed at promoting physical risk-taking, but their direct interactions with children seemed to be based upon safety concerns. The allocation of educator roles meant that an educator was virtually always physically present in the space where physically 'risky' activities were set-up; here, they would be involved in physically supporting and spotting children. Children's death/violence play, however, often moved fluidly through the setting rather than remaining in an area which a specific educator had been made responsible. Death/violence play also made use of physical resources in unexpected ways, challenging the anticipated safety precautions the educators had put in place. In reflecting on setting practices related to death/violence play, Eva noted:

²⁸ To a certain extent the opposite is true in some of the literature emerging out of the social studies of childhood which, in an effort to address deficit approaches to childhood, assume and essentialise competence (Komulainen, 2007). To this end, Kjørholt (2005, p.168) questions whether an emphasis on children's competence, rooted in notions of Western individualism, results in 'adults' abdication from a caring relationship with children'.

I feel like there's containment. When the children are outside and playing something and really moving with it, it's about: 'Well come over here and play something' or 'You need to go inside for a little while.'

(Interview, 12th July 2012)

Protecting children's physical safety was certainly one of the primary reasons verbalised for intervening into children's death/violence play. During the study, children running with stick weapons were told repeatedly not to run with objects in their hands. A group of children hiding in the bamboo from a marauding monster were called out for their 'safety'. Children were consistently forbidden from climbing a series of low log fences (about 50cm high) in the outdoor area.

'Rough and tumble' play met with an ambiguous and contradictory reception. On one hand, educators felt that it was a necessary and helpful way of learning to manage physical drives:

They need the outlet: aggression is too strong a word for it, but mild aggression and rough and tumble physicality.

(Interview, Tashelle, 11th July 2011)

On the other hand, many of the educators believed that death/violence play was physically risky and provoked many safety concerns which led to a rule that there could be no physical contact during pretend fighting; however, this was inconsistently applied. Although differences between indoor and outdoor spaces have already been remarked upon, educators agreed that even outside they monitored sounds and movement. Dhurata explained:

It's a health and safety thing. We have to protect them. Screaming means it is getting frenzied. They aren't contained. They are oblivious to others.

(Group discussion, 16th November 2012)

The dominance of safety discourses is broadly consistent across the early childhood sector in the UK, USA, and Australia. Wyver *et al.* (2010) argue that educators in these countries operate in a context of 'surplus safety', often attempting to prevent any type of danger for fear of even the most benign injury. Such a focus, which often trumped the promotion of managed 'risk-taking' at Westside Nursery, is unsurprising given the attribution of vulnerability to young children and the concomitant need for adult supervision and protection enshrined in the accountability-driven early years sector in England. The EYFS, as a 'highly prescriptive' document with a 'detailed network of norms and criteria' (Moss, 2012, p.135), includes extensive reference to 'welfare requirements', with 19/43 pages of the statutory curriculum document dedicated to

these matters. The document stresses the continuous and pressing obligations for attention to questions of safety stating: 'Providers need to ensure that, as well as conducting a formal risk assessment, they constantly reappraise both the environments and activities to which children are being exposed and make necessary adjustments to secure their safety at all times' (DCSF, 2008b, p.21). In keeping with these requirements, a series of weekly staff meetings at Westside Nursery were dedicated to developing risk assessments for a comprehensive variety of activities. Educators used a log book to record any and all injuries, which were then reported to family members. With some families in particular, educators were very careful in how they presented such information expressing concern about 'overreactions' and 'anger' from the parent/carer.

Combined with dominant narratives of the vulnerable child, the corollary of the dangerous child discussed previously, the reiteration of safety imperatives over various scales and contexts, and indeed real fears, served to ensure their centrality for educators. In such a context, characteristics of much death/violence play – such as its fast-pace, extreme physicality, and use of loud non-verbal sounds including screams, growls, and snarls – challenged the sense of the setting as a safe, calm, and protective site and underpinned educators' ambivalence in response to such play.

5.3.5 The 'incompetent child' of stage theory

Violent tropes were also considered to be a safety issue as a result of a perceived difficulty children had in distinguishing between ludic and everyday worlds in death/violence play:

It is a really hard play to be involved with. It is hard for them to know what is real and what is not.

(Interview, Pansy, 11th July 2011)

In gun play, children are trying to hurt someone in the play. They are often not aware of boundaries between their character and themselves.

(Group discussion, Alison, 20th February 2012)

The concerns voiced here were twofold. First, educators attributed injuries sustained in play to an inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The logic was that without clear and unambiguous distinctions, children might not maintain the ludic nature of interactions. The anxiety was that violent tropes would be interpreted as acts of real aggression and responded to accordingly or that children would not be able to contain pretend violence within the ludic world. Secondly, educators worried that

children might inaccurately re-contextualise events from the ludic to the everyday world:

When they are doing gun play, I tell them to shoot down and not at someone. We don't know the lives of these children. God forbid that they come across a gun.... If they have been told to point it down in play, then no one will get hurt even if they find a real one.

(Interview, Dhurata, 11th July 2011)

These concerns were not consistently applied to all children: indeed a good part of one of the group interviews centred on which children were able to make such distinctions and likewise which children weren't. Whilst educators disagreed about the categorisations of particular children, they did not contest the importance of the question, highlighting the overall value assigned to such competencies. Proficiency was often linked to developmental stages, with explanations carrying clear traces of Piaget's innate, staged progression from the sensori-motor period of infancy to the abstract thinking possible in adulthood:

Some children can't distinguish between reality and fantasy... Maybe it is too abstract for them. They think too concretely.

(Interview, Dhurata, 11th July 2011)

In this way, the difficulty in ascertaining the boundaries around ludic and everyday worlds was attributed to limitations in children's cognitive structures. Whilst at other times educators were quick to identify children's competencies, many of the comments which cited developmental psychology instantiated untenable *a priori* distinctions between adults, conceived of as rational abstract thinkers, and children, as lacking biologically in this ability regardless of the context or significance of the situation (Burman, 2008b).

It is noteworthy that in these instances educators' anxieties seemed laden with a desire for sharp, clear boundaries between ludic and everyday worlds in a move which Rogers and Lapping (2012, p.258) associate with pedagogies of play more generally which work to 'sustain an illusion of coherence, order and control'. Whilst this thesis will certainly maintain that the ludic and everyday worlds are different, it will offer a much more porous sense of the boundaries between the two (see Chapter 6) and one that is, following Sutton-Smith (1997), fundamentally ambiguous regardless of age.

In sum then, section 5.3 has suggested that educator responses to 'violence in play' at Westside Nursery were underpinned by particular constructions of childhood as well as policy imperatives reiterated at various scales. Overall, these combined to make

violently-themed play a site of concern and containment. As the following section will point out, however, this was disrupted by a series of other discursive and material flows.

5.4 Re-contextualised themes and the ‘developing child’

The previous sections have considered ludic deaths and violence in relation to children and adults’ practices and narratives; this section will move on to discuss the way themes, characters, and motifs were re-contextualised and reiterated in the death/violence play as well as educators’ responses. Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of Adriana’s commentary on the critical moment which began this chapter is the sense in which Abdul’s uptake of the dog character was a reoccurring feature of life in the setting, as well as at home: *‘He was a dog for weeks. He was actually in role as a dog so much so that his mom was concerned.’* The re-deployment of particular characters or narratives over time was not unusual at Westside Nursery; although, as I will go on to discuss, this provoked considerable unease amongst the educators flowing from competing imperatives.

5.4.1 Characters, motifs, and themes in death/violence play

Wild animals and monsters, as in the critical moment above, featured centrally in the death/violence play throughout the period of this study. Superheroes and fantastical characters of various persuasions were also widely taken up. Spiderman, Supergirl, Transformers, Iron Man, Firegirl, Ben-10, and other characters were re-contextualised from popular media. Characters such as royalty, fairies, witches, and wizards involved in death/violence play were re-contextualised from such sources as well as from fairy tales and other classic and contemporary children’s stories. Death/violence play also took place within more ‘socio-dramatic’ scenarios, such as automobile accidents and domestic scenes, in which case ludic characters were everyday rather than fantastical creations. Finally, there were times when death or violent tropes were mobilised without the framework of character or narrative: a child would slide to the ground in death position initiating a ludic interchange or a heated gun battle would take place with little other indication or development of the players’ position, role, motivations, or context.

Motifs in play often came in waves. In the summer term of 2011, dragons were central characters in the death/violence play for many days. Dragon play, however, largely dissipated when Zarah – one of its primary protagonists – left the nursery at the end of

the term. Other characters were not consistently present: vampires, zombies, and military figures disappeared for a time, only to be taken up again a few months later. This is consistent with Corsaro's (2009) assertion that play extends over time and space within peer cultures; although a play episode may end, children within the peer culture will pick up the play motifs at another point and often with increasing complexity.

Death/violence narratives often opened the *possibility* of exploring ethical themes or enduring philosophical questions. Similar to other studies about children's imaginative play (Corsaro, 1985; Edmiston, 2008; Galbraith, 2007; Holland, 2003; Jones, 2002), potential thematic inquiries provoked by the death/violence play at Westside Nursery included: questions about life, death, afterlife, and rebirth; loss, separation, containment, and rescue; danger, fear, and safety; power and leadership; sustenance, growth, change, and transformation; as well as normative moral questions about the 'good life'. These other studies seem to assume that the presence of particular motifs in ludic activity means that players are necessarily engaging with the moral questions they provoke (e.g. see Edmiston, 2008); however, death/violence play at Westside Nursery suggests otherwise. Whilst particular themes may have been present in the narrative, whether the political-ethical dimensions were explored and elaborated was a matter of the particularities of the play moment and participants. Just because death was present as a trope, for instance, did not necessarily entail an exploration of mortality or the 'good life': as noted above death was often unprovoked and would end just as abruptly with little exploration of its ethical or political character. In Chapter 9, however, I will go on to consider how an educational practice concerned with equality and social transformation can build upon some of the potentials of play to engage in such political-ethical deliberations.

The relationship of death/violence play to ethical-political or philosophical questions was not widely discussed amongst educators, but on occasion such explanations for the play, and justifications for the setting's policy allowing death/violence play, were offered:

It is necessary play because otherwise they wouldn't know what's right or wrong. Why baddies and goodies.

(Group discussion, Alison, 20th Feb 2012)

Unless they have opportunity to explore those ideas, then how do you come to terms with it – if you don't have time to think of it?

(Interview, Eva, 12th July 2012)

5.4.2 Media citations

Educators at Westside Nursery occasionally referred to the cultural resources drawn upon in children's death/violence play, including the popular media sources for characters and narratives. This was not, however, a particular focus of their discourse about death/violence play and such comments were brief, sporadic, and generally devoid of evaluative tenor. Educators, for instance, would name shows children were drawing on or reference the popular culture characters children assumed: *'Paul's been interested in Iron Man since he saw the movie'* or *'They're just re-enacting something they've seen on telly or people talking or things they've seen.'*

In contrast, the few presentation and discussion groups that I had with parents/carers included more substantial discussion about the influence of popular culture media upon children's play, including the apprehensions or concerns this provoked. A conversation during the initial consent meeting with Bangladeshi parents/carers generated the following conversation about children's play at home:

Sadia: He jumps off the couch like Spiderman. Runs around and I don't know what he's doing. I always tell him to stop; I just don't know why he does it.

Parvez: He does it because he's copying people. Copying people he likes.

Riya: My son watches TV and wants to play killing games. I promise we will play later but I never do.

(Fieldnote, 5th May 2011)

These comments carry traces of 'Locke's child' (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, p.44), a malleable tabula rasa imprinted by society. Indeed, concerns that children are particularly susceptible to media and other environmental influences, their play little more than mimetic reproduction, are widespread including in academic and popular advice literature (for a critical discussion of the 'media effects' thesis see Buckingham, 2000). This argument has spawned a series of experimental studies designed with the hope of ascertaining whether watching violent media will make children more violent (e.g. Boyatzis, Matillo and Nesbitt, 1995; Sanson and Muccio, 1993). In writing for parental and educational audiences, for example, Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1990; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006) argue that children's 'war play' – a term which covers a variety of violently-themed play – has changed over time. They distinguish between historical forms which they suggest drew on children's imagination and more contemporary forms which cause concern because of the perception that they involve limited room for children's imagination, questions, and values due to the constraining nature of corporate-influenced play scripts. Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1990, p.44)

comment: 'It's difficult for children growing up now to use their war play for their own self-defined ends. More often they use it to imitate the violence they have seen and this is what makes today's breed of war play so worrisome.' Similarly, Cupit (1996) asserts that play which draws on media scripts – such as Superhero play – is often constrained because it is drawn from narratives which are predictable and inflexible. These narratives, she argues, are distant from children's everyday experiences thus limiting their ability to modify it.

Suffice it here to reiterate that this perspective is being problematised in this thesis²⁹, for the main point in describing these studies in this section is to indicate that in the context of widespread 'moral panic' about media effects upon children, it is noteworthy that such concerns did not significantly occupy the discourses of educators at Westside Nursery. On one level, this is important to note as it is indicative of the complex and often unpredictable ways that voices are populated in different spatial-temporal locations. Beyond this general point, however, it suggests that other material and discursive flows were in operation which rendered conceptions of the child as a malleable reproducer of the media less salient.

5.4.3 The 'developing child' and the interests of the (boy) child

Adriana's interview included at the beginning of the chapter provides an opportunity to begin thinking about more dominant flows which were in operation amongst educators at Westside Nursery. Her comments (*'He needed to have the sort of courage to do that in a way. To speak that much. I think within that whole kind of game play, and supported by an adult there, kind of gave him...'*) hint at the professional importance attributed to adult efforts to build upon children's interests as a way to extend their skills, knowledge, and abilities in Westside Nursery. Abdul's interest in dogs and imaginative play was seen as a base for an adult extension which, in Adriana's comments, took the form of the staff's efforts to improve Abdul's use of English over an extended period of time as well as my immediate presence in creating conditions for his articulations.

²⁹ In contrast, throughout this thesis, I will begin from the understanding that references to popular culture are complex, non-deterministic, and productive (Corsaro, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000; Saltmarsh, 2009; Tobin, 2000): constitutive of initiation, continuation, and positioning in death/violence play, susceptible to innovation, and always taken-up in 'once-occurrent' (Bakhtin, 1990) and non-repeatable events. A play narrative revolving around a popular culture figure will always be different and unpredictable in some way, informed by the presence of different children and adults, the time/space of the play, as well as the inherent uncertainty of how another player will respond in the course of narrative development. See, for example, discussion in Chapter 8 about character declarations and lack of fidelity to media-resourced narratives and roles.

Indeed, 'building on children's interests' for effective curriculum planning has become a 'commonplace' in the English early childhood sector (Brooker, 2011, p.145) and beyond, constitutive of what Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to as a rhetoric of 'play as progress' where play is viewed as a natural occupation of children which can accordingly be mobilised pedagogically. This notion is enshrined in the EYFS (DCSF, 2008b, p.11) and therefore subject to evaluation by OfSTED:

All practitioners should, therefore, look carefully at the children in their care, consider their needs, *their interests*, and their stages of development and use all of this information to help plan a challenging and enjoyable experience across all the areas of Learning and Development. [my italics]

Here, the EYFS draws on Piagetian and Vygotskian views of the 'developing child' and incorporates recommendations from the influential Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study which supplied 'evidence-based' justifications for the 'intellectual challenge' and cognitive development provided by adult extensions of child-initiated activities (Sylva *et al.*, 2003). This form of 'evidence-based policy' is increasingly valued in the neo-liberal climate which reduces education to prescriptive notions of 'what works' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). As Brooker (2011) notes, the findings of EPPE and related studies were made widely available to educators through training and professional development activities with the result that the importance placed on building on children's interests is virtually ubiquitous as a discursive position amongst educators in England. Recognition that children not only have interests and opinions that matter, but also have the right to be listened to, is reiterated at a global scale in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, as well as *General Comment No. 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood* which affirmed that all aspects of the UNCRC applied to all children, even the very young.

Framed within the mantra of supporting child development through 'building on children's interests', citations of popular media within children's death/violence play were not generally viewed with suspicion or concern by educators at Westside Nursery. Instead, they were viewed as a potential catalyst for educational efforts generally and towards early learning goals in the EYFS specifically:

People are like: 'Not Barbies again, not Cbeebies.' But the children are inspired by these characters, so you can challenge it. And it can branch off into different areas of learning as well.

I said, 'I don't know what Octonaut is.' [A group of children responded:] 'Come to the computer we'll show you.' I thought, 'Actually, it's quite good'. Shark in the water, he's a friend to the divers and he goes off on missions. It's that rescue mode. I thought that's really good. That whole rescue game and you're helping your friend out and there's so much social skills in that.

(Interview, Penny, 11th July 2011)

Certainly influential in this regard was a well-publicised action research study involving 18 London-based early years settings in changing their zero tolerance policy towards war, weapon, and Superhero play (Holland, 2003) and numerous follow-up presentations and workshops offered by the author throughout England. Penny's comments above rehearse an almost identical argument put forward by Holland (2003, p.40): 'Allowing them to pursue their play interests has given them a means to make friends through sharing skills in constructing weapons or in knowledge of particular TV programmes or characters.' More broadly, a body of academic literature offers similar developmental arguments in favour of death/violence play suggesting that it contributes to physical skills when associated with rough and tumble play (Pellegrini, 2006) and literacy, at least in relation to Superhero play (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 1999).

The notion of following children's interests was espoused in largely un-problematised terms in Westside Nursery. Although concerns were raised about issues of safety and exclusion by the educators when children were engaged in 'child-initiated activities', the characters and narratives of children's 'interests' were generally taken at face value, almost assumed to be the natural and unmediated preoccupations or physical and emotional needs of individual children:

In the past they've been so interested we've tried to get them to use different constructions and made swords... Just for them to not get it out of their system but you're giving them permission so they're not knocking each other. They didn't have to hide or convert to something else.

(Interview, Pansy, 11th July 2011)

At first, the policy was that they shouldn't do weapon play. Then, we let them at least do it safely with modelling from adults. We decided to talk about it and teach about it, because they are so interested.

(Interview, Muznah, 11th July 2011)

Such naturalisation of children's interests and desires can be seen in Adriana's comment about Abdul which began this chapter: '*I think that's how he'd like to be seen. As sort of a protector. Centre of attention kind of moment.*' The gendered nature of this desire was neither acknowledged nor critiqued. Indeed, nowhere was the discourse of children's needs and interests more apparent than in the association of boys and death/violence play. Whilst girls' involvement was not denied, death/violence play was often associated by educators with 'the boys'.

Rachel: Is there anyone in particular who gets involved in this play?

Adriana: The boys mainly. Not totally. It's also boys that tend to be very physical in their play. Certainly boys that do imaginative play outside usually involve some sort of superhero play.

(Interview, Adriana, 11th July 2011)

'Boys mainly go through a stage where they have to go through physical fighting games. The concern is boundaries. Christian and Peter didn't know when to stop. They would get hit and get upset if it was hard and then hit back really hard purposefully. We want to show them the safest possible way.'

(Interview, Hayat, 13th July 2012)

Sensationalised fears of boy's underachievement in schools, Browne (2004) suggests, have to a large degree motivated a more recent turn to death/violence play as a venue for supporting boys' development. She notes that this is based on an argument that the neglect of boys' purportedly natural interests and characteristics, such as high levels of physical activity and desire for competition, are viewed as contributing to their alienation and lower levels of achievement in schooling. Permitting death/violence play is seen to go some way in addressing pre/schools' failure of boys. One such example of this is the document entitled: *Engaging Boys in the Early Years*. It describes the efforts of three early years settings in a nearby borough to recognise the 'different learning styles and rates of development of boys and girls' and then mobilise these gendered interests and 'learning styles' – specifically physically active death and violence play – into avenues of what is considered 'positive' cognitive and imaginative development (Smith, 2007, p.2). Indeed, changes to the 'gun play' policy at Westside Nursery reflected this shifting 'consensus' in the broader early years field. Detrimental here, however, is the assumption that such play is largely a male domain: this runs the risk of marginalising boys who do not 'develop' through such play or girls who do. Even more, such reification runs the risk of missing the socio-political, and indeed economic, mediations of desire and interest, which I explore in more detail in further chapters.

For the moment, a key point to make is that promoting development through a series of technical approaches – observing interests and planning extensions – puts educators in a fundamentally difficult position. It suggests, first of all, that children's interests are constant rather than contextual. It proposes that children's interests are fundamentally observable and knowable with the effect of introducing, as Bernstein (1975, p.24) pointed out over three decades ago in relation to pedagogies of play, 'a total—but invisible—surveillance of the child, because it relates his inner dispositions to all his external acts'. In this regard, childhood is reduced to a transparent and measurable state.

Secondly, it presents a view of the practices and outcomes of education as being fundamentally predictable – as long as ‘best-practice’ approaches are enacted ‘properly’ on children. Here, the malleability often associated with childhood – albeit a plasticity that is increasingly age-restricted in the policy and professional literature which promotes early intervention based on ‘critical windows’ of brain development – offers a promise for the future. ‘In a world seen as increasingly shifting, complex and uncertain,’ Prout (2000, p.306) argues, ‘Children, precisely because they are seen as especially unfinished, appear as a good target for controlling the future.’ On a broad level, technicism not only reduces ‘profoundly complex and political’ questions about the purposes and potentials of education but it serves to hide the values and assumptions underlying such aims, which are often associated with moves towards social control, profit, and the production of exploitable subjects (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p.10). More specifically, instrumental views of play and related pedagogies effectively subject educators to a mutually exclusive set of imperatives: following children’s interests and ensuring pre-set developmental aims. It is to these contradictory notions which the chapter moves now.

5.4.4 Getting ‘stuck’ and ‘moving them on’

As the preceding discussion has suggested, the practice of following children’s interests was deeply tied to developmental views about supporting children to meet early learning goals. This, however, placed pressures on educators when children did not appear to be ‘learning through play’ or when death/violence play did not map clearly on to the early learning goals. This tension occupied planning meetings and interviews. In one such instance, educators were discussing the observed activities of the day:

Irena – an educator who was relatively new to the setting – laughed nervously and commented: ‘Peter, Ian, and Sabir were playing “killing the beast” in the nature area, but I’ll just write down “searching for the beast”.’ Tashelle responded in an uncommonly quiet voice: ‘I guess it is just dramatic play isn’t it?’

(Fieldnote, 21st May 2012)

A commonly used phrase in expressing the tensions between children’s interests and developmental goals was that children were getting ‘stuck’ in death/violence play. During a group interview, Adriana commented:

You worry that they will get stuck for a long time. Like Abdul was the dog for so long. I worry that they get stuck on something and can’t find their way out. Like

Sabir, who just runs and roars. That's his major social interaction. I just wonder how long he would play like a roaring monster.

(16th July 2012)

It is notable here that nearly a year after Abdul had left Westside Nursery, Adriana was still referencing his dog play, the play she had referred to the year before as 'a sort of play that won't take beyond chasing', suggesting an enduring intensity to these concerns. The signifier 'getting stuck' was not only attached to Abdul by Adriana, however, but was a phrase that occurred repeatedly:

Walid, Fadi, and Dalmar are the other ones. They are stuck in the superhero play and shooting: 'ptchew, ptchew'. They haven't moved it on. Mostly Walid and them are running, coming and going, and spraying webs, but I haven't heard them say a storyline.

(Interview, Hayat, 13th July 2012)

They almost get really stuck in this play and to move them on is really difficult. Cause that's all they've got. And they don't know how to move out of it. For some they say, 'OK, that was that' and they move on, 'We're finished'. I know for Paul the other day, he found it really hard and he was totally stuck. But that's probably his personality. He really dug his heels in; really obstinate...

(Interview, Pansy, 11th July 2011)

The expression 'getting stuck' was often used to refer to play that was viewed, from the outside, as repetitive. But, more so, it was used in relation to a particular type of repeated play. It was not, for example, used in relation to children who engaged in sand or play dough play day after day nor was it used in relation to play in the 'home corner'. In contrast, observations of a child engaged in these types of play on an on-going basis were generally accompanied by comments such as '*she's really interested in...*' or '*that's his thing*'. These discursive differences may be partially attributed to the focus of questions I was asking in interviews. This would not, however, account for the differences noted in informal discussions and those in daily planning meetings. 'Getting stuck' was associated with death/violence play specifically, I am suggesting, because of its characteristics. As discussed above, death/violence play can be disordered, fantastical, un-verbalised, and potentially contravening of the established social order in its preoccupation with topics considered outside the purview of childhood innocence or 'developmentally appropriate' knowledge.

These aspects of death/violence play refuse incorporation in the developmental logic of 'building on children's interests' in order to meet teleological early learning goals, in what has become enshrined in curriculum as 'planned, purposeful play' (DCSF, 2008b, p.11) at least since the Rumbold Report was issued in 1990. As suggested above, the

often limited use of verbal language in death/violence play, for instance, contrasts with the early learning goals. Death/violence play which involves ludic violence used against others may seem to contravene or defy goals such as 'Understand what is right, what is wrong and why' and 'Work as part of a group or class, taking turns and sharing fairly, understanding that there needs to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people, including adults and children, to work together harmoniously' (DCSF, 2008b, p.12). Certainly, it is more difficult to interpret activity which not only explores discord and conflict, but is itself viewed as contentious in the setting, in relation to notions such as 'harmony', which allude to a sense of agreement of feelings and ideas, aesthetic concordance, and peace. Contradictions in educator's attempts to 'follow children's interests' and to support particular developmental trajectories echo those contained in policy documents. In both the EYFS practice guidance and *Fair Play*, a consultation document: 'There is an implicit ambivalence about the complicated, dangerous or transgressive elements that are also often associated with play', argue Rogers and Lapping (2012, p.251), suggested by their absence in accounts of the way play might contribute to a 'healthy and sustainable community'.

The notion of '*getting stuck*' links death/violence play, or at least some aspects of it, to concepts of stasis and lack of motion. This particular way of framing the 'problem' generated a particular type of solution (Schön, 1993): at Westside Nursery, educators spoke about the need to '*move children on*'. In this way, ideas about movement, such as direction, progress, and speed, became mapped on to children's death/violence play:

Paul does a lot of 'pow, pow, pow' and hitting types moves but there is no adult available to progress his play, to move it on.

(Interview, Tashelle, 11th July 2011)

Implying as it does a sense of inertia, the metaphor of '*getting stuck*' necessitated an externally-applied force to '*move children on*'. In this case, the outside force was generally assumed to be an adult, reinforcing a deficit view of the child unable to scaffold or co-construct knowledge with his or her peers.

The process of '*moving it on*' was often linked to narrative development in ludic activity; a number of educators spoke of the need to '*get a storyline going*'. The importance placed on narrative can be linked in part to the contentious nature of death/violence play. The presence of a storyline potentially offers rationalisations for what might be otherwise considered unsavoury ludic actions: Nasra's use of the gun against the monster in the critical moment which began this chapter was recognisable, and even

potentially sympathetic, when placed in the logic of the narrative which served as a justifiable explanation for her violent actions in a way that Fadi and Walid's non-verbal running and shooting did not have. To this end, verbalisation of personal and narrative motivations was possibly easier to frame in relation to the early learning goals and therefore to shape further educator interventions.

Kelly, for example, commented that getting involved in death/violence play in order to 'structure it', 'scaffold it', 'build it', and 'get a bit of a storyline going' was difficult precisely because children were 'stuck' without a recognisable narrative which might propel her own intervention:

Weapon play I find difficult to join in with because it's so repetitive always. Always the same. Lack of story line, at least when younger children do it. 'Bang bang, you're dead.' You try to reason with them: 'Maybe I'm not, I'm just badly hurt.' And it just doesn't... Well it depends on the child. Some children it just doesn't work. I find it harder to engage with than with other forms of play which makes me think when I reflect on it I probably engage with it less than other play and I think probably all of us do. Even those of us who know that we really should be tend to do it less...

(Interview, Kelly, 11th July 2011)

'Getting stuck', then, was both an imperative – a reference to a problem that required resolution – and an impediment to the proposed solution.

This is not to say that no educators joined death/violence play. Two educators in particular spoke about getting involved: one was the Head who was only in the same space as children for short periods of time and the other was off sick for a long period in the spring and summer of 2012. Such interactions rarely happened in my presence, however, and although educators' participation was certainly important in terms of understanding the broader context of children's death/violence play, this was not the focus of this research. Amongst the other staff, interactions were largely limited to observing death/violence play, at least when I was in the setting including the times when I limited my activity to non-participant observation. Most of their observations occurred at a distance with only intermittent interventions, such as those based on safety concerns discussed previously; however, educators occasionally sat nearby the play and discussed the narrative and characters with players, albeit in an extra-play capacity.

Deeply implicated in these concerns about children's perceived immobility and inertia, and the concomitant difficulty of effecting renewed and normative momentum, was a construction of the educational field as 'human capital development' (See Chapter 4). If educators could not be viewed as 'adding value' to the child through 'planned,

purposeful play' their professional identity and endeavours might be viewed as failures not only symbolically but materially in the form of negative OfSTED evaluations, lowered demand for their programme, and employment repercussions in the context of the 'strongly governed market' (Moss, 2012) of the early years sector in England.

5.5 Researcher presence

To this point, the chapter has discussed practices and perspectives related to ludic death, violence, and reiterated citations; however, little reference has been made to my presence at Westside Nursery, which risks attributing myself with a sense of omnipotence and neutrality which I have already subjected to sustained critique (see Chapter 3). Without wanting to engage in a narcissistic enterprise, emphasising my own presence and experiences to the neglect of research participants, the effects of my presence demand consideration in relation to two key points.

The first relates to the extent and direction of my influence on the death/violence play given that I participated as a 'co-player' on numerous occasions. In other words, if children engaged in death/violence play in my presence and I participated, it could ostensibly be understood as allowed, even encouraged, in the setting given the authority of my adult status. Whilst all the educators agreed that death/violence play happened when I was not in the setting, there were various opinions as to its prevalence in my absence. In part, differential assessments may reflect the way observations do not transparently reflect the world but are shaped by interests, desires, and conceptions of the world. These differential assessments may also reflect changes in educator responses to death/violence play when I was not present, which I will go on to discuss below. In some way, however, trying to ascertain the exact impact of my physical presence obfuscates the way that play themes may continue or be 'passed around' once introduced regardless of the presence of those initially involved. By way of example, there is some question as to whether my early responses to children's deaths, for example commenting on Maribel's death and prompting a response in the opening fieldnote, may have encouraged attention to and indeed further 'deaths'. This possibility notwithstanding, the particularised uses of and responses to 'deaths' in the fieldnotes are still worthy of consideration, including in relation to how such a generative metaphor may have been established and developed. What certainly seems clear from my observations, as well as interviews with both educators and children, is that my presence seemed to serve as a catalyst for larger groups to engage in death/violence play and for more sustained periods of time, creating more complex interactional situations where little could be taken for granted amongst the players.

The second point to note relates to my relationship with educators in the setting and the resultant implications when considering both observations and interviews as 'contexts for interactions' (Angrosino, 2005, p.732). Throughout the study, I was at pains in my direct communication with educators to stress my own confusions, misgivings, as well as exhilaration within death/violence play and to indicate that I was in no way clear about a pedagogical position in relation to such play. I explained that I was neither a proponent of a ban on death/violence play nor in favour of allowing such play to proceed without adult engagement; however, I was largely uncertain about the forms of engagement I considered possible or desirable. Whilst this was the discourse that I mobilised explicitly, my actions conveyed otherwise. When I was at the setting at the same time as the children, my time was occupied in intense play, interaction, and observation predominantly in the context of death/violence play. My attempts to assume an acquiescent and non-directive role as a research strategy most likely made my perspective about death/violence play appear fairly consistent, unlike my proclaimed confusions, a point which became clear when Tashelle commented to me:

I usually observe your play with them from a distance just to make sure they're OK. You don't really set rules or boundaries with them do you?

(Interview, 12th July 2012)

In this context then, it is likely that the educators felt they were responding to questions and being observed by someone who was, if not an enthusiast then, a supporter of unfettered death/violence play in early childhood settings. It is here that the inequitable positions between myself, as a lecturer in the early childhood field with high-status educational qualifications, and many of the educators are worthy of note. This combination of factors perhaps tempered some of the comments made by educators in interviews as well as their observed responses to death/violence play in the setting. It also perhaps goes some way in explaining some of the educators' contradictory comments and practices: for instance, in an interview Dhurata explained that death/violence play was necessary and helpful for children, yet her further elaborations and observed practices in the setting suggested she felt that most elements involved in such play had little place in an early childhood setting. In another instance, Eva, the Head, mentioned a conversation she had with one of the educators who expressed concern that children were getting mixed messages: when I was not in the setting children were told not to engage in death/violence play. Whilst I can never know the exact effects my presence had on the educators' discourses and practices, they are impossible to deny. In this regard, the combination of my status and seeming support for death/violence play likely resulted in a more generalised acceptance, in both

discourse and practice, of the play when I was present, the implications of which I will discuss in the following section.

5.6 Death/violence play as taboo

The preceding discussion has attempted to chart some of the material and discursive flows surrounding death/violence play at Westside Nursery, considering the double-voiced practices of children and educators in relation to the play which made recourse to competing constructions of childhood, policy imperatives, and social relations. These localised responses to death/violence play have been considered at various scalar levels, primarily national policy and Western 'adult imaginaries' of childhood, suggesting that contradictory imperatives and discourses have been re-contextualised in Westside Nursery in particular ways. Overall, the implication has been that contradictions do not reside solely within individuals, but flow from contradictions in sociospatial relations more generally: put simply, given the intensity and volume of competing imperatives it is hardly surprising to see ambiguities in how people understand and respond to death/violence play. Without wanting to negate the dynamic and unpredictable way these contradictions articulated in Westside Nursery, I want to return now to the point made at the beginning of this chapter that there was a relative stability in the iterative reworking of these double-voiced practices.

The stability of setting policy at Westside Nursery, where death/violence play has been explicitly permitted since 2004, is one such example. Both the present and past Heads were firm believers in the importance of imaginative play, including about death/violence. Certainly, when she was with the children, Eva actively participated in such play. Although her status amongst the other educators meant she had a considerable influence over setting policy, on its own this does not explain the general commitment to the policy as expressed by other educators. The discussion above suggests this can in part be explained by my status and presence. It also, however, draws upon policy and discourses at various scalar levels, particular those about 'following the interests of the developing child' with numerous reiterations across scale and territory.

Given the general acceptance amongst educators that death/violence play should be not explicitly forbidden, it is striking the level of discomfort such play engendered and the ways in which it was excluded from the visible workings of the setting. It is here that I am suggesting that death/violence play can be best characterised as having a 'taboo'

status in Westside Nursery and, given the multi-scalar flows involved here, it is likely to have this status in early childhood settings in the Anglophone world more generally.

'Taboos', argues Douglas (1966), serve the purpose of maintaining 'systems of classification'. Her point here is that people use systems of classification in order to deal with the overwhelming amount of perceptual data they come into contact with. Classification functions as a way of socially organising and controlling uncertainty and ambiguity: this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, for example, the way particular conceptions of childhood – such as the child as innocent and vulnerable – are continually reworked as a way of categorising and ordering the practices of children and indeed children themselves. As an open system, however, the world is often unpredictable and contingent (Collier, 1994), meaning there are always anomalies which 'confuse and contradict' (Douglas, 1966, p.37) ways of ordering the world which happens, for instance, when girls engage in physically active death/violence play discursively associated with boys' interests and needs or children actively engage with difficult, 'adult' knowledge about death and sexuality. In this context, it is worth repeating that play, and perhaps death/violence play more than other forms, is characterised by ambiguity (see Chapter 2): it is an activity which inherently disorders and takes apart (Henricks, 2006).

In attempting to deal with the disorder produced by anomalies, taboos instantiate a social 'coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals' (Douglas, 2002, p.xiii). In seeking to safeguard 'a vision of the good community' (Douglas, 2002, p.xx), taboos often produce conformity through confrontation with ideas or experiences which challenge dominant ways of categorising. In this way, the reiteration of similar discursive and material flows on health and safety, developmentalism, and the vulnerability of childhood across scales and contexts – such as policy, media, academic research, and public imaginaries – serve to constitute the ambiguous and disordered aspects of death/violence play as mutually exclusive from the 'good' early childhood setting. These particular flows sedimented through such reiteration and were reinforced by intensive monitoring, such as through OfSTED, and the resultant valuations of practice this brought with it. Any potential challenges were dis-incentivised through the prospect of negative repercussions for professional identities as well as the setting and concomitant job security in the early childhood market-place. In the climate of austerity measures and impending payment-by-results, access to scarce resources served as potential incentives for conforming to particular ways of categorising and indeed constituting practices within early childhood settings.

Whilst certain aspects of death/violence play were considered recuperable in relation to early learning goals, thus emphasising a particular sanitised interpretation of death/violence play, other aspects of the play defied such incorporation into categorisations of the 'developing' or 'innocent' child. As such, death/violence play occupied a contentious and uncomfortable presence, pushing the boundaries of the 'safe' space of childhood constituted by the borders of Westside Nursery. 'All margins are dangerous,' Douglas (1966, p.122) contends, 'If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.' As a result, potential violations of a taboo are closely monitored.

Confrontations with anomalies – or 'matter out of place' – may take various forms in the effort to contain uncertainty. This can range from emphasizing a particular interpretation of an event or attempting to control an anomaly including through the threat of specific harms. Beyond conscriptions of aspects of death/violence play for pedagogical purposes, efforts were often made to control it through implementation of health and safety rules or through efforts to '*move it on*', seeking to contain those aspects of death/violence play which were not considered recuperable within ordered and recognisable narratives. As a taboo form of play, it was sometimes marginalised, such as through efforts to push it outdoors or its exclusion from planning meetings and setting documentation.

It is the position of this thesis, however, that death/violence play, perhaps because of its taboo-ness, can challenge existing conceptions of early years practice, play, and childhood, including what children are but also what it is possible for children to be. As Douglas (1966, p.95) so eloquently states:

Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.

CHAPTER 6:

Blurred boundaries and monstrous inscriptions

The previous two chapters offered a broad account of death/violence play at Westside Nursery from the perspective of multidimensional sociospatial relations. Chapter 5 pointed to the use of ludic deaths as generative metaphor, the ambiguity of violence in play, and the complex re-contextualisation and explorations of themes and characters. These chapters suggested that a variety of contradictory imperatives shape the flows of educator responses to such play. Ultimately, an argument was put forward that in the contemporary educational climate in the UK while certain aspects of death/violence play are considered 'recuperable', this play has a taboo status in early childhood settings because it challenges dominant ways of thinking about and organising childhood, as well as encompassing the potential for disorder in relation to the social order. The present chapter will continue to explore the ambiguities of death/violence play in greater depth with a focus on everyday inequalities as they impact on, and are reproduced by, ludic activity.

In considering the relationship between ludic and everyday worlds, an argument will be put forward that this is one of simultaneity rather than exclusivity. This synchronism means that the boundaries between the ludic and everyday are often blurred, and certainly porous, with implications for everyday sociospatial relations. In particular, this chapter will analyse character assignment practices, indicating that these draw upon taken-for-granted social categorisations suggesting that whilst play theoretically allows for infinite possibilities, the concurrence of worlds means that conditions of possibility in ludic practices are informed by the everyday world. It will be argued that certain children are not 'recognisable' in the characters they seek to inhabit in death/violence play, based on the way that bodies are inscribed and positioned by class, 'race', and gender beyond the play. Conversely, ludic characters are not infinitely transformable but they 'stick', becoming fixed on particular bodies in the everyday world: of childhood in general and marginalised children in particular.

6.1 The relationship between everyday and play worlds

The previous chapter noted an anxiety amongst some educators at Westside Nursery which centred on children's perceived difficulties in distinguishing between pretence and 'reality'. Underlying this argument is a view that ludic and everyday worlds are indeed exclusive and bounded, in which case difficulties distinguishing between them

become rooted in developmental limitations rather than in the inherent uncertainty of the margins themselves. There is certainly precedence for viewing the relationship between play and the everyday in this way. As Chapter 2 indicated, the relationship between play and everyday worlds is generally put forward in a way that suggests a shuttling between two worlds where actions are either interpreted within a 'play frame' or within the everyday world (e.g. see Bateson, 1973; Nourot, 2006; Smilansky, 1990). What I seek to do in the ensuing discussion is to problematise this conceptualisation, and its accompanying common-sense narrative, which suggests that play and everyday worlds are dichotomous and clearly distinguishable to all those with the developmental ability to do so. To reiterate the point made in Chapter 2, this is not a move to flatten out all differences between the ludic and everyday, but an attempt to explore their fuzzy and porous margins.

6.1.1 Baby-eating dragons and dragon-baby tears

A critical moment will provide a way into this discussion as it turns askew the taken-for-granted including assumptions that: children move in and out of play, play is pleasurable, and ludic activity is a realm of open possibilities. It has been selected as a moment in which I was involved as a co-player, allowing for exploration and reflexive analysis of the subjective and embodied aspects of the argument I seek to make.

'You be the momma dragon. We'll be the babies,' Zahrah said firmly to me, launching a series of dragon adventures involving us and five other children which traversed the outdoor space. After a series of escapades, the dragon-children began to cry: 'We're hungry!'

In response to dragon-Zahrah's suggestion – 'Let's go eat the children!' – the dragon-children roared and stretched out their claws. Despite their best efforts, however, other children in the setting wanted no part in being the fodder for the dragon feast. They shied back, pushing the hungry child-dragons away. Refused nourishment, dragon-Zahrah thought quickly and ran inside to find a doll. Returning to the other dragons she explained: 'Here's a baby for us to eat. Let's cook it!' She began to roast the doll-baby over a 'fire'.

Raeni – one of the other baby dragons – started to whimper, real tears dropping from her eyes: 'No that's my baby. Give her to me!' But, Zahrah was not to be swayed: 'We have to! Or else we'll be hungry!'

I stood close by listening, uncertain how to respond in my position as researcher cum dragon and desperately nervous about the way the observing educators would interpret this scene. The other child-dragons did not share these concerns. They tucked into the meal, pulling at the doll-baby with their hands and devouring it ravenously.

Waiting until they were satiated, Raeni grabbed the 'baby' and held it tightly in her arms for rest of the afternoon.

When I mentioned this later to Hayat, one of the educators, she commented: 'That's my Raeni. She really cares about other people.'

(Fieldnote, 16th May 2011)

Writing within a psychoanalytic tradition might suggest that play narratives which involve death/violence – such as the ferocious human-eating dragons above – can be cathartic, allowing children to work through fears and anxieties which, if encountered in real life, would be highly traumatic and potentially unbearable (e.g. Bettelheim, 1978; Singer, 1994). My focus here, however, will not be to contest (or affirm) these points about the individual psychic purposes which death/violence themes serve in children's play. Instead, in line with the research questions outlined in section 1.2, I am interested to explore the implications of children's use of the monstrous dragons in this critical moment, including what this has to show about the relation between the ludic and everyday.

Raeni's tears in the fieldnote above provide an opening into this discussion. Potentially, her notable upset was a concern that the others would tear the doll, damaging an object in the everyday world of which she claimed possession. On its own, this explanation is difficult to sustain as a cause for Raeni's evident upset, however, given that as the child-dragons 'pulled' at the doll-baby to assuage their hunger, their hands rarely touched it; the act was a symbolic pantomime and the physical object never appeared at risk. It is here that Raeni's use of the word 'baby' in reference to the doll becomes telling. It seems unlikely that she was confused about whether this was a real baby or an inert object given her other comments do not suggest a concern that a living creature will be hurt. Indeed, my other observations and interactions with Raeni suggest that she was quite certain about such distinctions. Educators in the setting certainly had evaluated her as one of the more capable and 'school-ready', indicated by her placement in the 'highest ability' story group. In this context, her use of the term 'baby' is an indication that she accepted the doll in its ludic character in that moment. It is possible then to suggest that Raeni's tears referenced not only the fragility of the doll-object in the everyday world, but also the actions in the ludic world where a doll-baby was faced with certain death. The symbolic act of roasting and eating the doll-baby provoked a concern in relation to the doll-baby based on Raeni's sense of its particular value and meaning both as a baby in the play world (threatened with death) and as an object in the real world (of which she claimed possession).

On the one hand, the act of roasting and eating the doll-baby was one that 'made sense' as the dragons' attempt to assuage their hunger. As a co-player, coming face-

to-face with the graphic and gruesome death of the doll-baby, however, I found it curiously difficult to engage in the roasting. It seemed particularly horrifying because eating the doll-baby became loaded with connotations of cannibalism which, as Warner (1994) argues, is used in mythology as a symbol of 'outrageous transgression' (on kindle p.1454) and a 'radical sign of the Beast' (on kindle p.1469). My dismay was compounded by the status of 'the child'. Often used to symbolise ultimate vulnerability and defencelessness, babies are viewed as fundamentally in need of protection by adults, opposite to the roasting and devouring which I was considering participating in. In this moment, then, my responses as a co-player were a complex entanglement of the ludic and everyday: were we dragons eating a baby to sustain ourselves or were we humans eating the flesh of our own? The difficulties for me as a co-player in this moment (and potentially for Raeni) had to do with uncertainties in the relationship between the ludic and everyday.

What I am suggesting here is that play and the everyday are lived *simultaneously*: rather than being *either* in play *or* out of play, from this perspective, players are *both* in play worlds *and* the everyday. Both play worlds and everyday worlds have a substance and 'cultural reality' (Edmiston, 2008) where the play world 'is real as image' (Boal, 1995, p.45). In that moment then we were both dragons and humans, with all the ambiguities that such an understanding brings with it. The corollary here is that in this simultaneous experience, margins between the ludic and everyday are deeply blurred, or perhaps more accurately can be referred to as porous, traversed I would suggest by meanings (as with the doll-baby), but also ideology and affect.

6.1.2 Affective flows

Consideration of affect may offer some further clarification of the simultaneity, and indeed porosity, of ludic and everyday worlds. In trying to inhabit the mother dragon character, I could imagine and enact the concern that my offspring might starve yet I felt apprehensive about taking the life of the doll-baby – even as a ludic act. The narrative made me hesitate as I wondered: Is it acceptable to kill a living creature if our survival depends upon it? What does it mean politically and ethically to prioritise responsibility for those we are close to or similar to above those who are different?³⁰ As Edmiston (2008) contends play provides an opportunity to consider multiple perspectives of different characters, reflect upon the implications of their characters' actions, and grapple with ethical questions as players are compelled to 'answer' others (in a Bakhtinian sense).

³⁰ Such questions have a long history in moral philosophy (e.g. Tronto, 1989; Tronto, 2002).

I simultaneously felt anxiety in the everyday world: Raeni's tears were jarring in the perceived 'happy' and 'secure' world of the early childhood setting (see Chapter 5). I struggled to decide how to respond to Raeni's tears, feeling a compulsion to intervene in order to provide comfort as well as to support Raeni to name her evident emotions so that she and Zahrah could discuss the matter more calmly. Such is often the presumed role of the adult when 'happiness' is threatened. This, however, minimises the potential productivity of dissensus as well as children's capacities to negotiate difficult situations. Further, it normalises particular rationalised and meta-discursive approaches to expressing emotions. In such a model, 'emotions appear to be valued', contends Hoffman (2009, p.15), but 'the underlying subtext is one of emotional control and disengagement'. Whilst I am not suggesting that children should be intentionally made to feel upset, I was intensely aware that (unhappy) emotions and the ways suggested for supporting children to ostensibly resolve them can impose what are largely middle-class emotional models which diminish children's own capacities (Hoffman, 2009); as a result, I was uncomfortable with the thought of intervening.

My response, or rather lack of it, raised a different type of disquiet for me related to my concerns about how educators in Westside Nursery might perceive my presence in the middle of the conflicted and 'monstrous' doll-baby eating scene. Being in the setting as a researcher was impossible without the support of the educators; as a result, I often found myself negotiating a web of intersecting relationships and contradictory expectations (Albon and Rosen, 2014). My previous experience as an educator, as well as my knowledge of the setting, suggested to me that both participating in the 'baby-roasting' and not obviously working to maintain a controlled, calm, and orderly setting could be controversial. In retrospect, my unease also flowed from my own expectations and assumptions: by not responding in my accustomed manner, I became less recognisable to myself as a 'responsible' adult – all of which I found very unsettling as well as very telling about the ways in which I have held on to developmental views of childhood despite theoretical commitment otherwise. This extended discussion of my own response as a player and researcher during this critical moment has unpacked some of the sources of my concern, notwithstanding the multitude of unconscious assumptions and unintended consequences of my actions. Crucially here, the disquiet I felt within the play world was not easily separated from the unease I felt in the everyday world and here I would suggest that these similar feelings, experienced simultaneously, magnified each other.

The porosity of affective experiences across the boundaries of the ludic can also be seen in relation to Raeni's tears. In my fieldnote, I assumed that Raeni's tears were a

'real' emotion rather than an emotion 'put-on' in play. But just because tears are a largely involuntary corporeal response, Standish (2013, p.3) argues that they cannot be adequately understood without attention to their intentionality; in other words emotions, of which tears are a manifestation, 'have objects and involve beliefs'. Crucially then, were Raeni's tears a response to concerns for the doll, the baby, herself, or a combination? Is it possible then that the meanings in the play, the death of the baby, provoked real concern and sadness for dragon-Raeni? Here, I am pointing to the way that emotions provoked in play can be just as 'real' as emotions in the everyday world. Accepting that this could potentially be the case, indicates the difficulty, even impossibility, of separating feelings provoked in play from the player herself, for in order to cause the physiological response of tears the emotions must have some basis for the person herself – not just in her play character.

6.1.3 Ideological flows

Also noteworthy in relation to the ambiguous boundaries between everyday and ludic worlds are ideological flows. The suggestion here is that play worlds, rather than being a completely open possibility are, in practice, influenced and even constrained by discourses and sociospatial relations in the everyday world and that ideological claims made in play impact on the everyday. Raeni's reactions in light of her trepidations over the doll-baby roasting will serve as an exemplar in developing this argument.

Whilst there were any number of responses Raeni could have made, she proclaimed '*That's my baby*' whilst attempting to gain hold of the doll-baby. This was a complex assertion which may have referenced the doll as an object of possession in the everyday world or may have referenced her ludic relation to the baby, both in terms of emotional attachment and ownership. There is a long history of children being viewed as familial property and indeed in a neo-liberal climate children tend to be viewed as a possession of their parent(s) (Penn, 2008). This point here is not, however, to deny the complexity of parent-child relations which can exceed these propertisable terms. Indeed, the intensity of Raeni's statement suggests a particular emotional quality of the mother-baby relationship which is not limited to abstract and neutral evaluations of property value. It is to be expected, Vološinov (1976) notes, that utterances will be filled with tensions as they are populated with the ideological and material contradictions inherent to capitalism.

Continuing to follow Vološinov (1976) line of argument, utterances are also populated by expectations of others' responses. Did Raeni anticipate that asserting ownership

would settle the fate of the doll-baby? Such an assertion likely drew authority from the policies and practices at the setting, where debates over toy usage were often settled by ascertaining which children had first used the object. Underpinning this practice are more wide-spread ideas that an object can be possessed by an individual in ways which deny others from using, or even engaging with, the object: an elevation of market principles – including commodity consumerism and individual ownership – in all facets of life. Perhaps Raeni hoped that her assertion of a special mother-child relationship would settle the fate of the doll-baby. Such a claim is bolstered by what Ailwood (2007, p.157) refers to as the ‘enduring centrality of maternalism’ which suggests that ‘mothers are the single most important carers of their children and that this relationship must be defended at any cost’.

There were many possible ways Raeni could have responded in this critical moment and her responses can be interpreted in different ways, two of which I have suggested above. Regardless of interpretation, claiming the doll-baby as her own served to maintain a competitive and individualistic approach to resources and relationships within the everyday world. Further, her complex citations begin to speak to the way that ‘choices’ made in imaginative play cannot, in practice, be easily separated from the ideological and material contexts of children’s everyday lives. Ultimately then, I am suggesting that players exist *simultaneously* in play and everyday worlds: worlds which are porously bounded with blurred margins traversed by affect and ideology. The corollary of this point is that whilst the ludic is theoretically full of infinite possibility, in practice, the everyday world shapes to some degree the conditions of possibility for players. It is to this point that the chapter now moves.

6.2 Conditions of possibility for ludic characters

Dominant contemporary ways of conceptualising play, particularly in relation to children, present it as full of open, indeed infinite, possibility (see Chapter 2). Building on the argument that play and everyday worlds are experienced simultaneously, I will argue here, however, that ludic characters are not open to all children in the same way but are informed by sociospatial relations and normative categorisations beyond the ludic worlds. In other words, ludic possibilities are informed, although not determined, by the way that bodies are inscribed and positioned by class, ‘race’, and gender beyond the play. Indeed, some children are not even recognisable in the characters they seek to inhabit in ludic activity.

A fieldnote offers a way into this discussion:

After a morning engaged in vampire play, Paul said to me: 'Let's play Dracula next time when you come back.'

Cecilia, who had not been involved in the play that day, was standing near us and piped up: 'I'm going to be Dracula too.'

Paul retorted: 'You can't. You're a girl.'

Cecilia responded quickly: 'I'll be a princess and you be a prince.'

This was not acceptable to Paul who replied firmly: 'No I'm Dracula.'

I asked them both: 'But what if a girl wants to be Dracula?'

Cecilia turned to me: 'No. Only boys. Dracula is a boy.'

Amazed by her quick shift into advocating a highly gendered division of play roles, I persisted: 'But what if she really wants to?'

Now seeming to be strongly committed to this position, Cecilia replied even more emphatically: 'No.'

I was troubled by this discussion and did not want to remain silent as I feared this would suggest that I might uncritically reproduce participants' perspectives in my research (see Chapter 3). More importantly, I worried that to say nothing would be little more than collusion, what Griffin (1991, p.114) refers to as the 'nodding dog' position in research. At the same time, I was aware of the authority connected to my status as an adult and researcher, so I tried for a comment that would open rather than shut down the discussion: 'That doesn't seem fair...?'

Paul responded: 'Well, she could be Dracula Girl.'

(Fieldnote, 14th December 2011)

For the purposes of this chapter, what is worth noting in this fieldnote is the way that gender was viewed, by both children, as a constitutive limit for character possibilities. In Paul's initial comments, a child's ascribed everyday world status as 'boy' or 'girl' was explicitly mapped on to the ludic character: to be 'allowable' there needed to be recognisable meeting of the two. Cecilia's response served to address her 'slip' in transgressing this gendered order, by making recourse to a highly dichotomised alternative - *'I'll be a princess and you be a prince'* – and thereby proclaiming and indeed reproducing the 'truth' of this gendered division of play roles. This not only suggests that she understood the gendered logic that Paul introduced to the conversation but it was an effort to make herself more recognisable as a female player.

Recognisability, according to Youdell (2006, p.44), is rooted in the way that particular 'performances' – and here she is developing a Foucauldian-Butlerian line of argument about the citational practices which are necessary to continually bring the subject into being – 'have to make sense to work'. In other words, in order to be intelligible as a

particular type of subject – girl, boy, student, and so on – a person must continually act in a way that it is understood as such in the local context. To do otherwise is to risk invisibility, exclusion, or even punishment. In this case, Cecilia's response suggests that she understood, consciously or otherwise, that her possibilities for playing with Paul were precarious if she violated the gendered order he introduced. The firmness of her commitment to the gendering of play characters throughout the rest of the fieldnote suggests something more, however: a risk that if she challenged this gendered order her status as 'girl' may have been brought into question given the way that ludic characters were gendered in the setting.

Indeed, this was not the only time that gender was used as a limiting potential for play characters. On another day, Kaltrina was informed that she could not be the 'captain' of a boat used to escape from a marauding monster as 'captains' were not girls. In other cases, limitations were put on the capabilities of characters when they were enacted by female players. In the previous chapter, for example, Abdul's comments were suggestive that female characters needed protection from the dangerous dogs; on another occasion a group of girls – playing undeclared characters in the ludic activity – was told: *'You have to wait here. It's too scary for you.'* Importantly, Skeggs (2004a) notes that such notions of 'femininity' – woman as weaker and in need of protection by men – are highly classed, ascribed largely to middle-class women. Working-class women in her research were 'coded as inherently healthy, hardy and robust' in part because the particular forms of labour available to them exceeded such notions of femininity (Skeggs, 2004a, p.167).

As this suggests, gender was not the only social relation used as a constitutive limit for characters at Westside Nursery, but it was the main one which was verbalised. Size or age was sometimes used, as has been noted in other studies (Löfdahl, 2006), and particular 'racialised' physical features – such as skin and hair – were occasionally referenced as limits: *'Your hair is curly [to a Black child with an Afro]; you can't be Spiderman.'* This is not to say that these value-laden inscriptions were not relevant or operational, as I will discuss in more detail below, just that they were less explicitly verbalised. In all of these cases, however, reified categories in the everyday were mobilised as a ways of limiting characters and assuming authority over the narrative.

Comments made in relation to everyday positions and corporality were generally part of explicit efforts to set limits on other children's play possibilities, as in the case of Paul and Cecilia. The following interview, however, suggests non-play categorisations and their associated dispositions were also productive of the 'decisions' about which characters children took up in their play:

'Can anybody be a monster? Or only certain people?' I asked Aamaal and Ian one day during an interview.

'Everybody can,' replied Ian loudly.

'Everybody,' Aamaal repeated more quietly, looking at the computer screen where we had just watched a video of some children's monster play.

'Would you ever want to be a monster?' I asked Aamaal, curious because I had never seen her take on a monstrous character although she had often engaged in chasing and capturing monsters.

'Na...' Aamaal replied, shaking her head.

'How come?' I asked and we sat quietly while Aamaal considered her response.

'Because she's nice,' Ian interjected.

'Yah,' Aamaal concurred.

I turned to Ian: 'But you're nice! And you like to be a monster.' I made this assumption because he often takes on monstrous characters.

He laughed, almost sheepishly.

'And I'm the nicest boy,' Ian added. In seeking to clarify his earlier point, Ian shifted the conversation explicitly to gender. Why did Ian feel he had to introduce his masculinity here? Was his earlier comment about Aamaal's niceness a reference to gender that I had missed? Is that why he laughed when I commented on his niceness?

'You're very nice – that's for sure,' I responded.

'But everyone else isn't,' Ian added.

'Who's not nice?' I asked, interested if 'everyone else' maintained the gender undercurrents of the conversation and referred just to boys, largely equating masculinity with not-niceness. But this question embarrassingly amplified the sense of judgement I had introduced into the conversation and neglected the opportunity to explore the complexities of Ian's thinking about 'niceness' in relation to gender and the monstrous.

After a pause, Ian responded hesitantly, 'Well, the not nicest is.... I do not like... I don't know...'

Realising how my unfortunate reply had put Ian on the spot, I responded, 'Oh. No problem...'

But he was quick to interject, and before I had finished my attempt at reassurance, he suggested, 'You say first what I don't like.'

Not wanting to ignore his comment, yet feeling uncomfortable with the situation I had created, I responded, 'I don't know who you like...'

Again he interjected, 'And if you don't want me to choose I will say no, and if you do want me to choose I will say yes.'

In listening to him, I wondered if he was struggling to remember children's names or was worried about saying something 'mean' about someone, wanting to have me take this responsibility since I had created this particular discursive context: 'So do you want me to say a few names?'

Smiling, he nodded vigorously and I hesitantly began, choosing a girl in the hope that I wouldn't imply that it is only boys who are potentially 'not nice': 'Is Kenza nice?'

Both Ian and Aamaal responded: 'Yes.'

The moment I asked the suggestive question – 'Can she be a monster?' – I regretted it. Such a closed question produced a situation where it seemed that I thought some children could be monsters and others couldn't.

Ian nodded, but Aamaal responded decisively, 'She can be a fairy.'

'What about Hasani? Is he nice?' I asked them.

Ian looked at me without responding and Aamaal said quickly: 'A dragon [with a hiss in her voice], he can be.'

Shaking his head, Ian commented: 'Not a bit nice.'

(Transcription, 18th June 2012)

As Barbour (2010) notes, there are many times in ethnography where a researcher's responses *in situ* can be profoundly disturbing upon reflection. Certainly, during this interview I felt uncomfortable with my responses and this has only increased over time as I have reviewed this transcript. Understanding the interview as a co-production, there is little doubt that my repeated and limiting questions created a context of judgement and even dichotomised gender positioning. My repeated questions likely suggested to Ian and Aamaal that their initial responses were inadequate. As unflattering as it is to me as a researcher, this interview still offers some important insights about the availability of particular gendered social relations in the setting.

The conversation began with the idea that everyone can be a monster in play. This point required exploration, however, given the context: the interview was held during a part of the daily routine which was generally more formal and didactic (story group time) and was led by myself as an adult 'in charge' in terms of guiding the activity, choosing the room, and being 'responsible'. Story groups with educators that I had observed included discussions often laden with moralising commentary, including about how to be friendly with other children in the setting. Ian and Aamaal's initial response was likely informed by such experiences and, indeed, the claim that 'anybody can play' and that exclusion was undesirable based on a child's socially-charged characteristics, such as gender, were often reiterated by educators in the setting when close to or involved in children's imaginative play.

Regardless of the problems associated with my interviewing skills, two points are notable. One is the point raised that while everyone can be a particular character, in this case a monster, not everyone would want to do so because of their non-play characteristics. In other words, the logic Ian and Aamal introduced was one where everyday world dispositions informed character possibilities in the ludic, consistent with the porousness I have already suggested between real and play worlds. Secondly, these everyday world dispositions increasingly became connected to gender: being 'not a bit nice' in the everyday world was linked to being a monstrous character, albeit that under my probing Ian concurred that he was both nice and liked being a monster, and this disposition of 'niceness' was then implicitly attached to gender. Any explanation could have been given in the face of my continued (reductive) questioning, but gender was specifically introduced as an organising principle of play possibilities, suggesting at the very least that this was a discourse operating in the setting.

Certainly 'niceness', along with demonstrations of caring and 'good' behaviour, are characteristics which have been noted to cohere with 'hyper-femininity' in studies with children in the contemporary UK (e.g. see Allan, 2009; Paechter, 2010; Reay, 2001). These understandings rework historical references, where middle-class female 'respectability' is linked with particular forms of calm and disciplined comportment, as well as contemporary popular culture, such as the TV programme '*Ladette to Lady*, where several supposedly "aggressive, working-class, party" girls are chosen to take part in an etiquette course where they will eventually be transformed into ladies' (Allan, 2009, p.147). Girls who do not conform with these normalised understandings of femininity are often pathologised or not recognised as 'doing' girl, and experience numerous pressures to perform such idealised forms of femininity (Allan, 2009) particularly from adults in the public spaces of educational institutions (Walkerdine, 1999).

These studies highlight idealised contemporary forms of femininity and the ways in which gender is monitored and regulated. As Hennessy (2000) points out, however, a crucial question which is often negated is why these particular forms of femininity are 'recognisable' and indeed considered desirable in a unique spatial-temporal moment. Without such analysis, practices and discourses appear ahistorical and are abstracted from the political, economic, and social conditions which make them possible. Such moves follow the logic of commodity capitalism, she argues, where the social relations involved in a commodity's production are fetishised, even rendered unseeable. In contrast, she advocates interrogation of why particular forms of being come to be organised and made intelligible in the ways that they have in relation to commodity

production, consumption, and exchange. Here, Walkerdine's (1999, p.13) point that the 'good' girl 'prefigures the nurturant mother figure' is indicative of the reasons for persistent linkages between idealised femininity and 'niceness' and caring. Specifically, these associations reflect the continuing gendered division of labour within the home – where the labour to feed, clothe, and care for family members continues to fall disproportionately to women (Schober, 2010) – and the workforce where low paid 'caring professions' are composed predominantly of women.

Of note in Reay's (2001, p.158) study of a primary school classroom, was the way that 'niceness', although connected to academic success by children, was at the same time viewed as a derogatory descriptor: those children categorised as 'nice girls' were considered a 'contaminating presence'. A fieldnote from the present ethnography echoes these findings and offers a further example of how 'not nice-ness', with its gender connotations, was attached to death/violence play and was used to inform the limitations placed on play possibilities:

Azar approached me, leaving behind the group of four boys she had been engaged with in death/violence play, followed closely by Rafi: 'Rafi said I couldn't play.'

Rafi replied firmly: 'You can't.'

I responded: 'What's happening here?'; trying not to 'solve' the problem but still curious about the debate.

Rafi turned to Azar: 'This is bad play. You can't do it. Swords and baddies and people getting hurt.'

I asked Rafi curiously: 'Why can't Azar do that?'

Rafi reiterated: 'It's bad.'

I turned to Azar and waited. She stood quietly, looking upset, so I inquired: 'Do you want to play if it's 'bad' play?'

She nodded affirmatively.

Rafi continued to repeat, 'But it's bad!' as Azar and I looked on without saying anything. All of a sudden Rafi shook his hands quickly in front of him – magic? – and shouted: 'I made it into good play!'

(Fieldnote, 9th January 2012)

This fieldnote suggests that death/violence play was linked by children in this setting at some level to 'not niceness' or 'badness' which were linked to particular gendered understandings. Returning to the baby-doll eating dragons which began the chapter, perhaps this is one of the reasons that Raeni was uncomfortable in the shift from 'rehabilitated monster' (Stamp, 2004) – the nice, friendly, humanised dragons who had

been attending dragon school and building homes – to the more monstrous flesh-eating dragon. This shift called into question her attachment to a version of girlhood (and motherhood in the play world context) as caring and nice, potentially making her less ‘recognisable’ to both herself and others.

What I have been arguing to this point is that children’s everyday world subject positions and purportedly related dispositions acted as limits to the play characters which were seen as possible for them to inhabit. Importantly, inequitable social categorisations were not just cited as a basis for exclusion from particular play narratives but were seen to inform possibilities within the ludic, in keeping with the porousness I have put forth thus far. Not all children accepted such constituted limits; however, when they transgressed lines of recognisability, the ludic character did not always seem to hold together for others in the setting:

Monica walked past and saw me observing from a bench, close to the Duplo: ‘I want to make a gun.’ I had not seen her engaging in gun play before although I had often seen her involved in imaginative play. She worked steadily on the gun, occasionally asking me for help when she encountered difficulties. She looked over at a group of children engaged in what appeared to be a form of death/violence play: ‘I want to play with them.’ At one point when she was testing the gun and the pieces wobbled, she commented: ‘Like scissors.’ When the gun was ready she set off with it, holding it like a machine gun, and aiming at different groups of children. No one responded and she eventually returned to the Duplo table using the gun like a set of scissors.

(Fieldnote, 20th June 2011)

The lack of response to Monica’s action is what is particularly noteworthy here. Monica was a child who I generally saw playing with other children, so it is unlikely that this lack of response related to her status in the setting. It is possible that the children she approached were engrossed in other play narratives and therefore took no notice of her. Such a lack of response was not, however, common when being ‘gunned down’ in the setting regardless of the activity or level of engagement of those being shot at. On other occasions, when they were ‘shot at’ in a similar manner, children returned gun fire, ran away to develop the narrative, or issued some sort of imperative for the shooting to stop. As a result, I am suggesting here that the image of Monica, as a machine-gun slinging baddy, was so incongruous with what could be termed her ‘nice girl’ status in the setting, as well as the positioning of girls more generally, that the character was not read as plausible – even within the play world.

The way bodies are inscribed and read in a particular social order attests then to the limits of playful contingency where reified characterisations slip between the ludic and everyday world. Ludic characters did not always map directly on to children’s non-play

positions by any means, particularly as discourses about gender and other social relations are not unified and singular. Nor were attempts to impose limitations on the ludic just straightforwardly accepted; although, in the fieldnote about Cecilia and the Dracula character this was the case. Perhaps this was motivated by Cecilia's desire to engage in the play with Paul more than her commitment to the particular Dracula character. Paul's response to my questions about the conflation of gender and ludic characters suggests something similar: a desire to keep me 'happy' and committed to the future play he was proposing. My persistent comments indicated a dissatisfaction with the gender order being presented and Paul's response, the creation of a '*Dracula Girl*', may have been an attempt to address his perceived infraction through exclusion whilst still maintaining the gender 'coherence' of the ludic and everyday world selves. The feminising of ludic characters with the title 'girl' was reasonably common, for example both '*Supergirl*' and '*Firegirl*' figured prominently in the death/violence play at Westside Nursery. This maintained the female as always other to the normalised male superhero, keeping the character recognisable within the particular configurations of sociospatial relations. It did, however, open up space for ludic transgressions of actions and behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity.

In some cases, the limits imposed on character possibilities were directly challenged through calling on the authority of an adult, as in the case of Azar and Rafi's argument over her participation in 'bad play', or verbal and embodied refusal to comply with such imperatives. Indeed, the dragon baby story which began this chapter suggests the possibility of re-scripting gendered narratives in ludic activity; and, although I have been writing here primarily about the constraints placed on ludic characters by everyday world inequalities, play – perhaps more than other contexts – offers the theoretical possibility of such re-scripting efforts given the way it works to take the world apart and rebuild it anew.

6.3 Monstrous inscriptions

The above discussion begins to get at the difficulty in maintaining an argument that the play world is one of infinite possibility. Whilst this is theoretically the case, in the sense of not being constrained by material affordances of the human body for instance, in practice this is often not the case as the play world intermingles with the expectations and structural constraints in the everyday world. In the case above, inequitable social categorisations acted as a constitutive limit for ludic characters. Conversely, I argue that a result of the porousness of play and everyday worlds is that play characters –

their ludic dispositions, abilities, and affects – become connected to children’s everyday selves.

Returning to the fieldnote which began the chapter, Hayat’s response to Raeni-dragon’s act to ‘save’ the doll-baby is an indication that children’s practices and characters in play worlds are connected by others to their everyday world personhood. The educator’s comment – ‘*That’s my Raeni. She cares about people.*’ – made a direct link between Raeni’s play self and her everyday self. Raeni’s actions in the ludic, saving the baby doll, were seen as confirmation of the way she responded to people in the everyday world, ultimately reinforcing a view of Raeni as ‘caring’. Hayat’s singling out of Raeni’s acts, in contradistinction to the others’ actions, not only referenced their play selves then but contained an implication that they did not care about others, over and beyond the action in the play world. Ironically, Zahrah had just found food for her dragon siblings so they would not starve.

The claim which will be developed here is that not only do ludic characters and actions become, on occasion, connected to players’ everyday world selves, as with Raeni above, but they become fixed on particular bodies while they serve as mobile resources for others. This argument draws on Skeggs’ (2004a) efforts to distinguish the way that some bodies are essentialised, in other words they are the characteristics they are seen to embody, while others embody the same characteristics as detachable resources. This is a result of historical processes of inscription, she argues: ‘The way value is transferred onto bodies and read off them, and the mechanisms by which it is retained, accumulated, lost or appropriated’ (Skeggs, 2004a, p.13). The process of inscription is linked to historical inequities, where particular characteristics and dispositions are linked in the symbolic realm to marginalised social groups, and then valued by social groups which have the resources and concomitant authority to attribute exchange-value to particular dispositions. Crucially here, the same characteristic does not have the same value on different bodies: the value (or not) of a particular characteristic lies in its potential to be a mobile resource, detachable from the body.³¹ Processes of inscription and valuation, Skeggs suggests, serve to reify categories of difference and, in effect, ‘make’ class relations which enable the reproduction of unequal relations of production and exchange.

³¹ Skeggs (2004a, p.104) notes, for example, the way ‘excess’ was re-signified in the 1980s: whereas it was previously associated with the working class being ‘beyond governance’, it ‘became harnessed and re-branded into the lifestyle of the middle-classes’. When associated with the middle-classes, excess was seen as positive and even productive precisely because it was ‘practiced by those who are seen to be capable of self-governance and restraint’. For the middle-class, excess became a resource detachable from the body.

Here, I want to suggest that ludic characters can become 'fixed' to childhood in general and marginalised children in particular. Beginning with the former, there is a self-reinforcing circularity which fixes ludic characters, the monstrous by way of example, on childhood. Particular conceptions of childhood suggest children have a 'natural' affiliation with the monstrous given their supposed 'shared primitiveness' (Warner, 1994, p. on kindle p.923). This presumption is one basis for mass marketisation of monsters to children. To give a sense of the extent of monster-saturated media in young children's lives: Disney's *Monsters Inc* film grossed US\$590,000,000 and the four *Shrek* Films, produced by DreamWorks Animation, grossed a total of US\$2,877,000,000 (FindTheData, 2012). TV also provides a significant cultural resource for children's imaginative play (Marsh and Bishop, 2012) and CBBC and the CBeebies (BBC children's television) – where monsters feature frequently – were mentioned at numerous points by the children at Westside Nursery.³² Widely available as a cultural resource for children, the monstrous is then commonly taken up in children's play, as it certainly was at Westside Nursery, thus reinforcing the idea that the monstrous is an inherent interest of childhood.

This can lead to a (re)inscription of the monstrous on childhood as a social body because of the way some of the common features of this ludic activity, in large part necessary for the narrative, are those often associated with the 'primitive', irrational, or savage. Death/violence play, including about the monstrous, at Westside Nursery was often fluid and disordered involving: screams and other loud non-verbal sounds; rapid movement in many directions; non-linear narratives³³; and, uninhibited physical contact to stop the monster or as the monster tried to kill the other characters. These are manifestations which would be expected in a narrative about monstrous characters, indeed they are often present in the horror genre of film. These narrative features and the resultant play were characterised and criticised, however, by some educators in the setting as '*frenzied*', '*uncontained*', and '*out of control*' as outlined in Chapter 5 – notwithstanding that other characterisations were also offered. In effect, the narrative characteristics of monstrous play may have an (unintended) consequence of bolstering and reproducing constructions of the child as 'dangerous' (Mills, 2000). Such generational inequities are also particularly classed inscriptions: Hendrick (1997, p.43),

³² This is not to say that children and their play themes are simply determined and manipulated by multinational corporations. Despite the extent of the market impact, children – and the same could be said about adults – actively 'take up, reject, and negotiate the subject positions available to them' (Saltmarsh, 2009, p.50) in mass media, positions and ideologies which themselves are contradictory rather than monolithic (Stamp, 2004).

³³ As noted in Chapter 3, narrative became my memory strategy for producing fieldnotes. Whilst the story of the baby-doll eating dragons is told as a coherent narrative at the beginning of this piece, such coherence was 'applied' by me in the remembering and writing. In watching videos of play, the messy, interrupted, and non-linear aspects of the play became more apparent than they had in my fieldnotes.

for example, argues that one of the reasons that schooling became compulsory in England was the result of concerns that working class children were out-of-control where 'many commentators made the implicit assumption that, in the long run, only education would prevent the 'dangerous classes' from continually reproducing their malevolent characteristics.' All this is to say that the blurring of play and the everyday world can serve to re-inscribe pre-existing conceptualisations of childhood as 'monstrous', 'dangerous', and 'primitive' on children, where adults are viewed as necessary in their 'civilisation' (Phelan, 1997).

As I have already alluded in relation to social class, the inscription of the monstrous on particular bodies is not only a generational matter. Such 'fixity' was the case in the example of Zarah: here, I am suggesting that the monstrous dispositions of the dragon character were not fundamentally mobile resources but were fixed to her beyond the play, as Hayat's implicit comment in relation to Raeni's purportedly caring act illustrates. Skeggs (2004a) suggests that whether particular characteristics are mobile resources or become fixed is in part related to historical forms of inscription based on 'race', class, and gender inequities. Here, it is indicative to point out the way that constructions of femininity could have served to fix such monstrosities to Zarah, as opposed to Raeni. While both are young black girls from working class families, in this play world, Zarah did not conform to conventional forms of femininity schooled in docility and gentleness – the 'niceness' pointed to in the conversations above. Instead, her play acts invoked myths of a 'monstrous femininity', summoning fears of an 'ungovernable female appetite' (Warner, 1994, p.399 on kindle) and 'untamed nature which must be leashed' (Warner, 1994, p.248 on kindle), constructions of femininity ascribed particularly to women of colour who are often demonised as angry, aggressive, or even fearsome (Calafell, 2012). The mapping of Zarah's monstrous play character on to racist constructions of Black femininity served, I suggest, to further inscribe her everyday world self with such characteristics. Whilst educators described Zarah as '*independent*' and '*takes initiative*', terms which have positive associations in relation to EYFS (DCSF, 2008b) goals, these evaluations were often accompanied by qualifying statements that Zarah was '*uncaring of how others felt*', '*self-interested*', and '*angry*' particularly at the birth of her new sister.

Considering the way Peter and Yousef, two Black boys, were inscribed as monstrous – particularly in contrast to Ian and Paul, two White boys who were considered '*relatively less deprived*' by educators – is also indicative of the way that intersecting inequalities served to fix ludic characters and dispositions on everyday selves. All four boys often engaged in play involving death/violence and the monstrous including with each

other.³⁴ All four boys often took on monstrous characters and were involved in chasing, 'attacking', and generally attempting to 'get' others. While Ian's play tended to be more physically restrained than the other three boys, with touch either mimed or gentle, all four cited acts of violence in their play and, notably, there were not consistent and continuous qualitative differences in the other boys' use of monstrous violence. The ways the monstrous was attached to the boys beyond the play worlds, however, differed in consequential ways.

Ian and Paul were often cited by the educators as '*skilled*' and '*successful*' players, able to think creatively and imaginatively through their uptake of different (often monstrous) characters and introduction of different narratives in order to '*move the play on*'. Dhurata, by way of example, commented: '*Ian has a sense of imagination way above the others*' (Interview, 13th July 2012). Over time, Paul was increasingly ascribed with these abilities. Early on in this study, as noted in Chapter 5, he was viewed as one of the children who '*got stuck*' in such play, but as his play became increasingly verbalised and narratively organised, his capabilities rather than supposed deficits were more often the points taken up by educators. In one group interview with the educators, both Ian and Paul were mentioned numerous times, with educators commending their 'skills' in using play characters for a variety of purposes. Dhurata, for example, commented: '*Paul can smooth the waters between Peter and Rafi, who will just fight. He is the voice of reason, offers possibilities*' (Group interview, 20th February 2012). Hayat commented: '*Paul is so advanced in imaginative play – ahead of the other boys*' (Interview, 13th July 2012). The point here is not to evaluate Ian and Paul's imaginative abilities but to consider the way characters – including the monstrous – functioned in the educators' discourse as a transformable resource which Ian and Paul were able to 'put on' to develop imaginary worlds and resolve disputes amongst others. Notably, monstrous characteristics were not inscribed on Ian and Paul's everyday world selves.

By way of contrast, both Peter and Yousef were often singled out by educators as not being able to '*contain*' themselves and not knowing when to '*stop*', much in the way that Abdul had been characterised the year before (see Chapter 5). This included concerns these boys would hurt or scare others when they were monsters in their death/violence play. Dhurata, for example, commented in an interview: '*After he's been doing this play, Peter always tests boundaries*' and '*Yousef is an aggressor and mean*'

³⁴ Peter and Paul selected each other as preferred play partners during interviews. Although Yousef seemed to want to play with other children, he did not play consistently with a particular group. Paul indicated that he enjoyed playing with Yousef. Ian played with all three on occasion, but he generally engaged with another group on a more regular basis and was named only by Peter as a preferred play partner.

(Interview, 12th July 2012). It is important to note, however, that this was not a homogenous position amongst the educators or even within a single educator's practices. Penny, for example, critically noted the impact of such inscriptions: '*When something happens between the children, it is often Yousef who gets blamed*' (Fieldnote, 9th January 2012).

It is worth reiterating that during my observations, all four boys were involved in highly physical interactions which often involved non-verbal sounds, expressions, and 'violent' movements, which were entirely consistent with the monstrous characters they were playing. Sometimes, this was clearly a form of ludic rough and tumble: this was especially the case with Ian. At other times it was far less clear where the activity lay on the continuum of rough and tumble to physical aggression (see Chapter 5) as the following example suggests:

Paul decided he was Wolverine with the sharp claws. Rafi declared himself 'Blue Spiderman', throwing his web to trap me. Paul-Wolverine ran up, scratching at the web with his claws to free me. Rapidly switching sides, Rafi-Spiderman called us and launched a series of adventures. As we ran across the open area in search of an enemy, Rafi-Spiderman tripped over one of the cones that Carl had placed in a long row. Paul-Wolverine ran over and began kicking the cones down, raising his claws and growling loudly as Carl yelled: 'Stop! Stop Paul! You're not my friend.' This was not the first time I had seen Paul turn Wolverine from a 'goodie' into a ruthless character – unless he imagined Carl was the enemy we had been searching for?

(Fieldnote, 9th January 2012)

The point here is not to condone intimidation, physical aggression, or the colonisation of space or bodies, but to consider the way similar practices resulted in the inscription of monstrous dispositions as essential characteristics of Peter and Yousef, rather than ludic actions in particular moments. In this example, as in others, Paul was involved in extremely physical practices which could have similarly been read as '*uncontained*' or '*dangerous*'.

The opposite can also be noted: observations of Peter and Yousef suggested that both engaged in extensive imaginative play, with Peter in particular often using characters to develop narrative lines or resolve conflict with others – skills attributed by the educators to Paul and Ian. By way of an example, an excerpt from my fieldnotes contains the following remarks:

Rafi, Abasi, Paul, and Peter had been playing together for the morning. Their play began as soldiers but shifted into a more familial scene: this happened as Peter turned himself into a baby – crawling on the ground and 'cooing' in infant tones – in a gesture which seemed designed to pacify a series of fights. The other three had been circling, yelling, and chasing Peter in a way which I

couldn't determine if it was 'real' or pretend. As the three boys stood with their weapons pointed at Peter, he dropped to the ground as a baby. Once Peter assumed baby form, the antagonism seemed to dissipate. Paul hugged him and became his 'flying daddy'. Was Peter using the baby character as a symbol of his vulnerability but also his acquiescence to the 'authority' of the others?

(Fieldnote, 26th March 2012)

The purpose of this discussion has been to demonstrate the way that attributes associated with monstrous characters were consistently linked in the educators' discourses to Peter and Yousef, and not Paul and Ian, despite similarities in the boys' ludic activities. This suggests that the monstrous play characters they took up did not function as mobile resources, as in the case of Ian and Paul. This has to do in part, I suggest, with the way systemic racism, combined with particular inscriptions of gender and class, meant the monstrous characters Peter and Yousef inhabited became increasingly fixed on these boys as *essential dispositions* beyond the play worlds. Black men (and boys), from slavery to the present, have 'been represented as the monster that haunts the imaginations of white American society' (Liggins, 2007, p.29). With its particular history of colonialism and close relationship with the US, this particular racist construction resonates in British society as well. Indeed, Phoenix and Frosh (2001, p.33) point out the way some 11-14-year-old White boys in a London-based study depicted Black boys as being both admirable for their perceived closeness to hegemonic masculinity³⁵ and feared for the same reason: 'raced' inflections of hegemonic masculinity constituted Black boys as being too 'hard' or having a 'predilection for violence'. Whilst monstrous play was not the only reason for such categorisations of these two boys, everyday world racism interacted with play character dispositions, serving to attach them to particular children more than others, and in turn created the conditions where their play characters began to be read as particularly monstrous.

This was not only the case with educators, but with some of the children as well:

Gerome and I were talking about 'goodies' and 'baddies' on TV shows when Gerome turned to me and commented, 'Peter's a baddie.' A bit surprised as this seemed to come out of nowhere, I responded tentatively: 'Is he?' Gerome replied: 'And I'm a goodie.' I nodded an acknowledgement and asked: 'Why is Peter a baddie?' Gerome explained: 'Because he's going to go to jail.'

(Video, 12th March 2012)

³⁵ Phoenix and Frosh (2001, p.29) argue that although the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' is complex and dynamic across time and place, 'hegemonic' characteristics such as 'heterosexuality, toughness, power and authority, competitiveness and the subordination of gay men' continue to hold sway in the construction of young masculinities.

Paul ran behind me yelling: 'Save me Rachel! Save me!' Sabir followed closely behind swinging a sword at us. I responded: 'Captain Hook!' the character he had earlier proclaimed, 'What's wrong? Why are you trying to get us?' Still waving his sword, Sabir responded: 'Because I'm a baddy and I killed somebody.' I responded in a 'scared' voice: 'What made you so bad?' Sabir quickly responded with a growl: 'Peter did! I'm so angry!'

(Video, 12th March 2012)

All morning Cecilia had been asking me if she could come upstairs with Peter to be interviewed. At clean up time she approached me: 'I don't want to go up with Peter, I want to bring Kaltrina. She is my friend. He is too scary.' Peter had just changed from Bruce Banner into the Incredible Hulk and was growling away just out of earshot.

(Fieldnote, 18th June 2012)

Likewise, even when Yousef was dressed as a Superhero, as he often was, the children often responded to him as enemy, baddie, or monster, taunting or calling him to chase and catch them:

I was sitting observing the outdoor space when Dalmar came running over followed by Walid and Ajay. They were laughing and Walid commented: 'That's funny' as Yousef, dressed in a gold superhero cape and mask, came running after them. The others screamed – in excitement? Walid yelled: 'Monster!' and Sami teased: 'Na na, na na! You can't get us!' as they ran off with Yousef following.

Yousef grabbed Ajay, who laughed as he was pulled down to the ground. After a moment of being pulled by Yousef, Ajay yelled: 'Stop!' When Yousef did not stop, Ajay began to struggle and was finally able to get away as Yousef doubled over on the ground after Ajay sharply squeezed his cheeks. This play, if it was still ludic, had become physically very rough. Adriana, an educator, glanced over but didn't say anything.

Ajay ran over to Walid and Dalmar as Walid, putting his arms around other two, whispered: 'You know. Listen. We can fight that Superhero!' He yelled: 'Spiderman!' and they set off in search of Yousef.

Yousef had removed his superhero costume but came running when they called. Yousef jumped on Ajay, crunching him into a ball and pushing roughly at him. Ajay pushed back and began to call for help. Adriana ran over and shouted: 'Boys – stop!' as she separated them.

Ajay defended himself to Adriana saying: 'He's going to kill me!' Adriana responded by taking Yousef inside to 'have a talk'.

When Yousef reappeared, the other three called out his name and the chasing narrative began again.

(Fieldnote, 25th June 2012)

The activity in this critical moment was physically engaged and appeared to be causing a degree of discomfort if not pain, with Yousef certainly taking on an aggressive role as

the monster in the narrative. As an observer, I found it difficult to watch, despite noting that the play actions were consistent with the narrative which seemed to be developing and that the play was restarted at least three times by the players, indicating an on-going interest in being a part of it, however ambivalent this desire was.

It is possible to suggest that part of the way Yousef was viewed in the setting related to the way his actions violated expectations of children and educators in the setting as to 'appropriate' uses of physicality. Whilst it is likely that this does, in part, explain reasons the 'monstrous' characterisations were connected to him, I want to suggest that this was more complicated and cannot be explained only by a particular quality of activity. As I have pointed out, rough physical play was not uncommon in the setting, and certainly Ajay responded with an act which caused pain for Yousef. This raises a myriad of questions not only about safety but about the particular constructions of masculinity/femininity operating in the setting; however, the question I want to focus on here centres on why physical aggression came to be associated primarily with Yousef and Peter. In particular, the point here centres on the way that Yousef and Peter were seen to *be* monstrous: in this moment, for instance, Adriana specifically removed Yousef from the play, as if assuming that he was both the cause of and the danger in the situation.

Although Yousef began this critical moment dressed as a Superhero, which was recognised by the others to some degree given Walid's reference to '*fighting that Superhero*', the reaction of the others suggests that the characteristics often associated with Superheroes – namely a moral and material dedication to protecting humanity from large scale threat – were not available to Yousef in the eyes of the others at least in this moment. They explicitly named him as a 'monster' and set the narrative stage where he was positioned as an excluded enemy, from whom they sought to evade capture. Importantly, Yousef was the only child I observed who was declared by others as the 'baddie' or 'monster'. Whilst other children did take up these characters, it was generally self-proclaimed. This contrast is suggestive of the way that the monstrous was 'fixed' on Yousef beyond the ludic world but in a way which informed character assignment practices.

Despite the roughness of the play, Walid, Ajay, and Dalmar continued to engage with Yousef, seeming to incite him to take up the monstrous character over and over. In response, Yousef took up this role chasing and 'getting' the others, despite his costume suggesting that he was interested in being seen otherwise. Perhaps, as with Cecilia above in the story of Dracula, accepting such a characterisation was viewed as the cost of being able to engage with the others. Yousef's commitment to this role,

however, meant a constant restaging of himself as monstrous, distancing him further from the Superhero he had originally presented as, and serving to reinforce the fixity of the monstrous on his body.

To conclude, views of childhood as monstrous and the fixing of the monstrous as an essential disposition are certainly misrepresentations, suggesting as they do that particular children or groups of people *are* or have the capacity to be fundamentally monstrous while others don't. The implications of such misrepresentations are significant as they can serve to label particular children as 'problematic' in ways which reinforce inequities. What's more, the conflation of the monstrous with particular social groups instantiates fundamentally reductive and one-dimensional views of childhood, gender, 'race', and class. Yet, the ambivalence of the monstrous in play, including the politically and ethically charged questions it raises, challenges attempts to reduce childhood or other social phenomena to any sort of simplistic formulations. It is this ambivalence and complexity which opens up the possibility for considering play – including that about the monstrous in death/violence play – as a site of radical potential, an idea which will be explored further in Chapter 9. Before doing so, the following chapter will extend the argument put forward here that ludic and everyday worlds are both porous and experienced simultaneously, focusing on the embodied nature of death/violence play and the implications for everyday world personhood.

CHAPTER 7:

Dialogic bodies, (dis)identification, and inequality

The previous chapter argued that play and everyday worlds are experienced simultaneously, with the porous boundaries between these worlds traversed by affect and ideology. The chapter considered the implications of this synchronism arguing that certain children are not recognisable in the characters they seek to inhabit in death/violence play; conversely, the dispositions of ludic characters and death/violence play narratives may become mapped onto particular marginalised children and onto childhood as a social group on the basis of social inequalities.

In this chapter, I will continue to explore the implications of this simultaneity and the porous boundaries of the ludic, considering the relationship between everyday world inequalities and children's death/violence play specifically in relation to the subject identifications made in death/violence play. I will argue that death/violence play at Westside Nursery was a deeply embodied experience which had implications for the resultant intensity of (dis)identifications³⁶ with play characters and dispositions and, as a result, everyday world selves. Rather than assuming, however, that death/violence play leads to a particular outcome for everyday personhood, I will propose a notion of the dialogic body which takes into account the complex and contradictory process of identification as well as the possibilities that play offers for disidentification.

7.1 Setting the stage

7.1.1 Ethical or hegemonic identities?

The problem being addressed in this chapter, or more precisely the arguments that I wish to extend, are the seemingly incompatible assertions made in the literature in relation to death/violence play and its implications for everyday personhood. This point is best exemplified by staging a confrontation between two studies. On the one hand, Edmiston (2008) argues death/violence play allows for the formation of ethical identities in the everyday world. Conversely, Browne (2004) suggests that this ludic activity is complicit in the establishment of hegemonic male identities and, as a result, contributes to the reproduction of gender inequities.

³⁶ The notation '(dis)identification' is used as a composite in reference to identification, counteridentification, and disidentification (see section 7.3 for explication of these terms).

Chapter 1 discussed Edmiston's (2008) study of his co-engagement with his son in death/violence play in some detail, highlighting his argument that the complex questions and emotional investments prompted by this play allowed for exploration of ethical issues and indeed the formation of ethical identities in the everyday world. He maintains that taking on different characters – including those which are monstrous, evil, or violent – allows players to consider the impact of their actions and work to be ethically answerable to others. Such reflection may happen within or after the ludic activity. His argument, however, assumes that what is brought to or taken from death/violence play interactions is a concern for 'doing good' to another, yet it is also possible that the rush of authority and domination which can come through inhabiting characters which evoke fear and terror in others is what traverses into the everyday. Ultimately, Edmiston (2008) obfuscates the relationship between play and the everyday, specifically here the manner in which physical prowess, strength, and the exercise of domination are concatenated with hegemonic forms of masculinity and that these, therefore, may be reinforced when such characters and narratives are enacted in death/violence play.

Indeed, this is Browne's (2004) argument about Superhero and weapon play based on her study with 3-6 year old children in English early years settings. She argues that interest in death/violence play, which was mostly expressed by boys in her research interviews, was based on the opportunity it afforded to explore and enact hegemonic masculinity both within and beyond the play. In death/violence play, she argues, the use of embodied movement demonstrative of virility and strength, colonisation of vast spaces, and pretend physical aggression was:

...a potent signifier of gender and as such not only influences how others begin to position the boys but also develops the boys' understanding of what their bodies have the potential to do and what their bodies can and should do to reflect their positioning as 'masculine'.

(Browne, 2004, p.90)

The repercussions of this ludic activity, she argues, are that 'while the boys are experiencing power the girls and women are experiencing being dominated' (Browne, 2004, p.92). Notwithstanding the problematic nature of basing arguments on what appears to be an assumption of 'authenticity' and 'truth' in interviewees' self-presentation and the largely undifferentiated presentation of 'boys' as a social group, the important point for this chapter is Browne's (2004) argument that by playing particular characters and enacting death/violence narratives, which often draw upon narrow and discriminatory cultural resources, hegemonic subject positions become

possible and plausible in the everyday world. The difficulty with this argument, however, is that there is an elision of what ludic and everyday acts imply. In other words, there is a loss of the idea that in the ludic realm, the everyday world is taken apart and put together in different ways. Given the nature of play there is a possibility that putting relations of inequality under a ludic lens – such as by enacting forms of hegemonic masculinity and considering the implications on others – may allow for an opening up of the status quo.

Despite the methodological differences between these studies and their analysis of death/violence play, both authors claim that there is a relationship between ludic and everyday selves which is in accord with this thesis. Both lines of argument, however, assume a somewhat predictable consequence of death/violence play; although, they differ in their estimation of whether this is an ethical identity (Edmiston, 2008), albeit one supported by an adult play partner, or hegemonic identity (Browne, 2004). This chapter will argue that these positions are less incommensurate than they seem. It will be suggested that whilst both ethical and hegemonic identities are potential, even possibly concurrent, outcomes of death/violence play, they are neither guaranteed nor are they the only conceivable effects of death/violence play (see Chapter 2 on emergence and the interaction of generative mechanisms in open systems).

7.1.2 Rethinking personhood

The emphasis on 'identities' in both Browne's (2004) and Edmiston's (2008) work can be linked to a broader move in radical intellectual traditions towards consideration of 'subjectivity' and the self. This has been motivated in part by the question of why people consent to conditions of inequality, exploitation, and oppression, or – put differently – why resistance to conditions of domination is limited or has often been unsuccessful (Blackman *et al.*, 2008). This has led to an examination of the self as deeply implicated in the 'grinding stability and exploitative continuity' (Blackman *et al.*, 2008, p.19) of inequalities, including through the process of interpellation of the subject-form and concomitant subjectification (for various theorisations of this process see Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997; Pêcheux, 1982). Contemporary attempts to conceptualise subjectivity often begin from Foucault's notion of the subject as produced in power/knowledge: here distinctions are made between 'subjectification (the condition of being a subject)' and subjectivity, lived experiences within multiple subject positions (Walkerline, 1999, p.4). This distinction indicates the necessity of considering both abstracted subject-positions and the ways these positions are taken up and negotiated in people's everyday lives.

One of the difficulties with such formulations of personhood, argues Burkitt (2008), is that 'subjectivity' relies on *a priori* understandings of the self as constituted in conventions and domination. Not only does this make it difficult to account for differences in people's lived experiences of subjectification (Blackman *et al.*, 2008), but this obscures the way selves also 'emerge from the intercorporeal and intersubjective world of interactions and mutual interdependence' which are not just about control and domination (Burkitt, 2008, p.238). Whilst the notion of subjectification is important in any conceptualisation of selfhood, as ideology works through the subject-form to perpetuate inequitable social relations (e.g. Althusser, 1971; Hennessy, 2000; Pêcheux, 1982), Burkitt (2008, p.244) maintains subjectification is insufficient on its own in accounting for personhood. In what follows then, I generally follow Burkitt (2008, p.241) who, in writing with the Bakhtinian circle, argues for an understanding of:

...the social self of everyday life, formed in the relations of the everyday world, both official and unofficial; a self that is a subject of power in some respects yet open to the possibility of immersion in alternative social worlds, or to the influence of the values and beliefs of various ideologies.

In many ways, this resonates with Skeggs' (2011, p.509) invitation to 'imagine personhood differently', considering how time, energy, and dispositions may be relationally focused 'with and for others' as opposed to being 'invested in the self, or extracted from in the interests of capital'. Rather than considering these conceptualisations of personhood to be mutually exclusive, this thesis takes up Rikowski's (2002a) argument that personhood, in the form of labour-power, is both 'in and against capital'. On the one hand, Rikowski (2002a) argues, our social beings and the fabric of our lives are woven together with capital creating the surplus value that capital depends on for its own existence and expansion. On the other hand, personhood can exist without capital in other modes of provisioning and survival. This is crucial because, as with Burkitt (2008) in relation to the subject of power, Rikowski (2002a) is suggesting that personhood is not solely determined by capital, negating all possibility of agency and change.

Evident in this discussion is that the self cannot only be understood in relation to discourse and norms. For despite its theoretical origins in the work of Althusser (and Gramsci), theorisations of subjectivity have been marked by a de-materialisation, both in terms of the economy and the biological, towards the symbolic. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, this thesis takes the view that subject-positions, and cultural narratives, are generally organised and made intelligible in relation to commodity production, consumption, and exchange (Hennessy, 2000).

7.1.3 The embodied self

The dematerialisation of the self in relation to corporeality and its affects is shifting, according to Blackman *et al.* (2008, p.18) in recognition that the body 'is the means by which there is any world for us at all'. Unlike the Cartesian supposition that humanity is unique because of the mind – leaving a legacy of mind-body dualism which at its worst has been used to justify class inequities, gender subordination and colonial domination (Finnegan, 2002; Howes, 2005b; Shilling, 2003) – Shilling (2003) argues for the importance of understanding human (un)consciousness, interaction, and experience as necessarily embodied, an argument maintained in this thesis. This is not a return to a pre-given biological body written on by culture, a form of naturalist reductionism; nor is it a view of the body which reduces it to the impact of discourse, which misplaces the body's materiality, including its physical presence, experience, and potentiality (Shilling, 2003; Shilling, 2005). Rather than remaining within the confines of a debate framed by a nature-culture dichotomy as apparent in the two positions outlined above, this thesis takes up Shilling's (2003, p.11; Shilling, 2005) critical realist understanding of the body as an 'unfinished biological and social phenomena which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry into, and participation, in society'.

This conceptualisation implies a multifaceted understanding of the body. As a locus of experience, the body is something we 'are', the subject-body or 'the fleshy situatedness of our modes of living' (Mol and Law, 2004, p.44). This is the inner body which is experienced, felt, and exposed to introspection and self-reflection. As something we 'have', the corporeal form is an 'object-body' subject to the workings of labour, capital, power, and medical intervention. Here, the somatic can come to embody social categories and classifications (Shilling, 2003). For instance, when those children construed as boys are encouraged into physical activity – a phenomena Lloyd's (1978) infant experiments demonstrated – this social practice actually changes the physical body's musculature and skeleton in relatively permanent ways. The result of such bodily changes is that they reinforce gender stereotypes, seemingly justified by inherent material differences. Without negating these conceptualisations of the body as something we 'are' or 'have', Mol and Law (2004) argue that the body is also something we 'do', a somatic acting and enacting, for example through measuring the object-body, feeling the subject-body, and generating new bodily conditions. What this suggests is a dynamic, potentially agentic body (Shilling, 2003), with the caveat that the body is often 'done' unconsciously and has particular conditions of possibility which are both biological and social; in other words, the body is not completely contingent. It is

here that I offer the notion of ‘dialogic bodies’ as a way to conceptualise the more-than-social flows of ideology, affect, and bodily change.

7.1.3 Dialogic bodies and emplaced citations

The notion of the embodied self being put forward in this thesis is not a ‘self in a case’ or a tightly bounded body with individual experiences rooted in the player as an originary source. Instead, bodies have a permeable border with the world (Bakhtin, 1984b; Mol and Law, 2004). This is a move towards a relational sense of embodied personhood constituted through inter-corporeal interaction with others as well as the political-economy, discourses, and spatial-temporal locations. In arguing that selfhood has no ‘internal sovereign territory’ but is ‘wholly and always on the boundary’, Bakhtin (1984a, p.287) contends:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a thou).

It is here that the notion of the dialogic body comes into play: for bodies are, as with language, ‘overpopulated’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p.294) with ‘voices’ and embodied citations (see the discussion in section 3.5.1 on the dialogic). Embodied actions respond to a continual flow of dialogue: embodied selves act in response to embodied actions in both the immediate and the more distant past; as well, they are populated with the anticipated responses of others. These embodied citations include movement, posture, sounds, and proximity.

This suggests that embodied action is embedded within sociospatial relations. As James (2000, p.28) puts it, ‘Children experience their bodies not just as individuals, but as school children and as playmates, social statuses and social relationships which create awareness of the variety of childhood bodies.’ Indeed, institutions engender particular bodily relations and dispositions and in turn are reproduced by these relations (Lyon and Barbalet, 1994). In this sense the body is experienced and enacted differently in differently places – in other words, it is ‘emplaced’ (Howes, 2005b) in time and space – and always in relation to other bodies and social and productive functions of the particular space. Further, embodied actions as well as utterances have different meanings and implications in different sociospatial relations.

Rather than being constructed by discourses, in this dialogic formulation, people – as embodied selves – cite discourses, social relations, as well as embodied actions as a way ‘to orient themselves in their relationships and interactions’ (Burkitt, 1998, p.165). Such citationality is part of the way the social is reproduced; however, citations are never exactly the same, as each context and each person’s situated ‘biography’ infuses embodiments, making every act a ‘once-occurrent event of Being’ (Bakhtin, 1993). This suggests there is always a slightly nuanced change with every act, with the possibility existing for more extensive transformation.

Here, however, I do not want to overemphasise the rational intentionality of this process. ‘Double-bodied’ acts may be motivated by unconscious assumptions, including those held in the body, or emotional concerns. As discussed in Chapter 6, reasons and emotions are not necessarily incompatible as emotions are generally a response to ‘real’ situations and can prompt reasoned action: actions, however, are often un-deliberated ‘emotional responses to the flow of experience’ (Sayer, 2011, p.148). Overemphasising intentionality also negates the way unacknowledged conditions affect interventions, including the way actions are perceived and taken up by others.

To sum up, I have been arguing here for an understanding of personhood as fully ‘emplaced’ (Howes, 2005b) – with mind, body, and sociospatial context existing in complex interaction. This conceptualisation suggests that understanding the persistence of inequalities requires interrogation of embodied personhood which is informed by the temporal pre-existence of inequitable social structures, such as the contradictory operations of capital and normative discourses, as well as less ‘official’ (Burkitt, 2008) values and social relations. In this view, embodied selves are actively involved in the reproduction and transformation of social formations through a process I have referred to as ‘dialogic bodies’. In essence, this implies a nuanced, changing, and ‘unfinalisable’ notion of embodied personhood (Bakhtin, 1993).

7.2 Embodied intensities and dialogic bodies

To this point, the chapter has highlighted the increasing emphasis placed on the self in social research, including debates this has provoked in relation to the implications of death/violence play for children’s everyday ‘identities’. The discussion thus far has stressed the embodied nature of being, suggesting the notion of ‘dialogic bodies’ as a way to understand the inter-corporeal and more-than-social renewal and transformation of personhood as well as inequalities.

In developing these ideas, in this section it will be argued that play is a deeply somatic engagement between dialogic bodies. A close examination of one critical moment from the ethnography will explore the way ludic characters are enacted in embodied dialogue with those immediately present, including other player-characters, as well as those more distal aspects including previous play, sociospatial relations in the setting, and the broader social order. What this section highlights is the complexity of this process: 'embodied dialogue' occurs both within and across the porous boundaries of the ludic and everyday.

The ludic activity in this critical moment was already underway in the outdoor area when I sat down nearby and began video-recording:

- 1 *Cecilia lay on the ground close by to where Peter was climbing: her legs and*
2 *arms were spread wide open and her head slumped to the side. Seeing Cecilia,*
3 *Peter ran over, placed his arms on either side of her supine body and leaned in*
4 *towards her face. Sitting upright again, he softly pressed up and down with both*
5 *hands on Cecilia's stomach in a repeated movement. Bending over her face*
6 *again, he kissed her gently on the cheek three times. Cecilia lay perfectly still*
7 *with her eyes tightly shut, a wistful smile broadening slightly during Peter's*
8 *actions.*
- 9 *After a time, Peter looked up at me in a smooth movement: 'I think she's dead.'*
10 *I responded with 'worry' in my voice: 'What happened?' Peter looked up at me*
11 *while placing his hand gently on Cecilia's forehead: 'I think... I think she's dead*
12 *after she fell off...' He reached down and kissed her, this time on the edge of*
13 *her mouth. After a moment, Peter placed his ear next to Cecilia's mouth and*
14 *then laid his face gently on hers, in a close embrace.*
- 15 *As a group of children ran by laughing and talking, Peter jumped up and ran off*
16 *after them.*
- 17 *Cecilia, however, remained in her motionless position, just barely opening her*
18 *eyes to follow Peter's retreat. Almost immediately, Carl began to shout Cecilia's*
19 *name over and over drawing the attention of Kakali, Kaltrina, and Sabir who*
20 *had been playing nearby. The four knelt down on the ground next to Cecilia's*
21 *'corpse'.*
- 22 *On one side of Cecilia, Carl put his hands softly on her stomach and continued*
23 *to call her name. On her other side, Sabir began pumping up and down with his*
24 *hands on Cecilia's stomach while Kakali and Kaltrina looked on. Cecilia did not*
25 *respond, and Sabir pushed his fist hard into her body, got up, and walked away.*
- 26 *As Carl continued to gently rock her body and Kakali leaned in to put her hands*
27 *on Cecilia's stomach, Peter re-approached, jumping down and putting his*
28 *hands abruptly on Cecilia's hips. She jolted slightly from the sudden touch and*
29 *put her hands on her stomach, her body less open than before. Kakali reacted*
30 *similarly, pulling her hands quickly off of Cecilia. As Peter climbed roughly up*
31 *the length of Cecilia's body until he was lying on her 'corpse', Kaltrina and Carl*
32 *got up quickly and left.*

33 *With Sabir kneeling nearby and Kakali watched from slightly behind, Peter held*
34 *Cecilia's face securely in his outstretched hands, planting it repeatedly with*
35 *hard kisses. After a moment, Cecilia opened her eyes and used her bent legs to*
36 *twist Peter off of her body. He tumbled off and rolled along the ground.*

37 *In the process, Cecilia flipped onto her side in a new death position in front of*
38 *Kakali who reached out and patted Cecilia on the back. Peter quickly returned*
39 *and kneeled in front of Cecilia's corpse. Gesturing to Sabir to be quiet with his*
40 *finger over his lips, Peter pointed at Cecilia's stomach and then himself.*
41 *Pushing Sabir away gently, Peter bent down to kiss Cecilia softly on the cheek.*
42 *Cecilia immediately rolled over on to her back and away from Peter's kisses.*

43 *Kakali turned around and said loudly to me: 'Cecilia's dead! She's dead!' Peter*
44 *looked up, waved his hands, and explained: 'She died! I kiss her three times*
45 *and she's never going to come up.'* At the sound of Peter's voice, Kakali got up
46 *and walked away.*

47 *As she left, Peter slipped his arms under Cecilia and tried to lift her up. Unable*
48 *to move her body, he took her arm and began pulling her along the ground.*
49 *Cecilia smiled as he tugged, using her legs to stop her body from flipping to the*
50 *side as a result of Peter's one arm pull. Kakali circled back and grabbed*
51 *Cecilia's other arm. Pulling in the opposite direction she stated emphatically:*
52 *'Cecilia's my friend.'* In response, Cecilia's smile widened. Stumbling to the
53 *ground as a result of the tug-of-war, Kakali still managed to maintain her tight*
54 *grip on Cecilia's hand. At the same moment, Kaltrina stepped in for the first time*
55 *to pick up Cecilia's leg. Seeing this, Sabir picked up Cecilia's other leg. As*
56 *Sabir, Kaltrina, and Peter lifted Cecilia's corpse off the ground, Kakali*
57 *scrambled up and began walking in tandem with the others, never letting go of*
58 *Cecilia's hand. Working together, the four children – led by Peter – carried*
59 *Cecilia to a small, semi-enclosed area. Peter crawled into the space and pulled*
60 *Cecilia's body in after him.*

61 *Kakali and Kaltrina stopped at the edge of the space but Carl and Rafi, who had*
62 *appeared amidst the excitement of carrying Cecilia's dead body across the*
63 *outdoor space, crawled in after Peter and Cecilia.*

64 *Speaking over Cecilia's still dead body inside the small space, Peter declared:*
65 *'I'll kiss her. I will!' He kissed her a few times and then reached over and pulled*
66 *her pants down slightly exposing her bum. Cecilia pulled them up and began*
67 *rubbing her eyes. Sitting up, she looked directly at Peter who commented, 'You*
68 *was dead!' Cecilia replied: 'Yes. I was'. Peter hugged her and climbed out from*
69 *under the tunnel. In response, Cecilia dropped to the ground – dead again.*
70 *Seeing her death, Peter jumped back inside the small space to kiss her as all*
71 *the children leaned in to watch including Kakali and Kaltrina from outside the*
72 *space.*

73 *Peter climbed out of the space once again only to be called back by Cecilia:*
74 *'One time you can kiss me.'* The two leaned in and kissed on the lips. Peter
75 *jumped out again as Cecilia 're-died'. Not getting a response, Cecilia continued*
76 *to call Peter's name issuing a sharp 'Oh!' when she realised that he has*
77 *dropped to the ground about 10 feet away, declaring his own death.*

78 *Cecilia jumped up from her death position and ran towards Peter. Propped up*
79 *on his elbow Peter called out: 'I'm dead! I'm dead!' Seeing Cecilia coming, he*
80 *dropped forcibly onto his back on the ground with his eyes closed, arms, and*

81 *legs spread wide. Followed closely by Rafi and Kaltrina, Cecilia ran over and*
82 *began to rub Peter's stomach back and forth with her hands.*

83 *As Cecilia attempted to revive Peter, Rafi declared, 'I'm dead too,' and dropped*
84 *to the ground with a big smile on his face. His supine body lay touching Peter's,*
85 *his knee raised under the curve of Peter's arm. He continued to wiggle,*
86 *however, and his eyes remained open watching Cecilia work at Peter's side.*
87 *Just behind, on the opposite side, Carl dropped to the ground again yelling, 'I'm*
88 *dead! Cecilia, I'm dead!'*

89 *Cecilia stopped rubbing Peter's stomach and gently pinning Peter's hands*
90 *down, kissed his forehead. Cecilia began to get up, stopping to respond to*
91 *Peter's attempt to hold her down with a quick second kiss on the forehead. She*
92 *ran over to Rafi – who was sitting up to watch her caring for Peter – and pushed*
93 *him down into death position. He smiled and closed his eyes. Peter rolled over*
94 *on to his stomach and watched with a smile on his face. Cecilia gently rubbed*
95 *Rafi's stomach, and – putting her hand on his forehead – bent down and kissed*
96 *him on the mouth. Seeing this kiss, Sabir and Peter both dropped down in*
97 *death position. Cecilia put her hands on Peter and Rafi's backs yelling hurriedly:*
98 *'Peter! Peter! Wake up!' She jumped up and ran off with the three boys close*
99 *behind.*

100 *Peter returned to the enclosed area, 'dying' on the ground. After a moment, he*
101 *got up and looked around. Seeing Cecilia, he dropped to the ground in death.*
102 *She appeared not to notice as she ran around the space with others. Peter*
103 *squawked [in a baby bird-like voice] over and over: 'Maa! Maa!' Turning to me,*
104 *he declared: 'I want Mama. I want Cecilia.'*

105 *(Video, 21st May 2012)*

7.2.1 Embodied intensities

One of the striking aspects of this critical moment is the limited use of verbal language: only 17 linguistic comments were made in total, out of which 5 were addressed to me, an ostensibly outside observer of the play (lines 9-12, 43-45, 104). Despite this relatively unscripted ludic activity, a detailed narrative of death and revival was developed and loosely coordinated between seven children. Here, the body was a key resource used in the chain of communication with gesture, movement, touch, and gaze offering semiotic resources (Kress, 2010): the recurrent citation of death symbolised by closed eyes and open, sprawled limbs is such an example. The use of embodied communication is noteworthy in the first instance because different modes offer affordances which impact on their potential use and meanings (Van Leeuwen, 2009), albeit these can contradict each other (Schlichter, 2011): for instance, the use of an embodied rather than verbal expression of death afforded a sense of the ultimate passivity of the corpse which a verbal declaration interrupted.

Here, I am drawing attention to the deeply corporeal ways that the characters were generated or 'done' (Mol and Law, 2004) in this critical moment. In producing ludic characters through manipulation of limbs, postures, sounds, and movement, the players enacted their embodied selves. Importantly, these were simultaneously ludic and everyday productions: as Peter worked to revive Cecilia, his movements were enacted by his everyday body – Peter as Peter – and as his ludic body – Peter as ludic saviour in the face of death. In enacting their character's emotions, such as the sadness carried in Peter's squawks for his 'mother' (lines 103-104), players produced and experienced emotions in both their ludic and everyday subject-bodies, an amplification of sorts which was also explored in the previous chapter in relation to Raeni's tears (Section 6.1.2). In the critical moment above, the players not only enacted their own bodies, but were involved in deeply inter-corporeal interactions with others. This occurred in various degrees of proximity: ranging from gaze from afar, to Kaltrina and Kakali's close observation from outside the enclosed area (line 61), to the cramped quarters where Cecilia's corpse was taken (lines 58-59). In these proximal moments, bodies interacted haptically– through strokes, pats, pushes, pulls, and kisses – bringing smell and touch as well as aural and visual senses to the fore.

As an observer I was struck by the intensity of this moment; indeed, I was surprised to realise that the transcript covers a period of only ten minutes. The consuming nature of the ludic atmosphere experienced by myself as an observer also seemed to be present for the players. This viscerally engaged ambience can be seen in Peter's carefully modulated and attentive efforts to care for Cecilia early in the ludic activity (lines 2-14),

Kakali's impassioned declaration of friendship with Cecilia (line 52), and Sabir's evident frustration when unable to revive Cecilia (line 25). Even more, this can be seen in Cecilia's passionate commitment to maintaining her embodiment of death. Remaining supine and stationary in the outdoor area left her open to the onslaught of rapidly moving, jostling, and tumbling bodies generally, as well as the specific interventions that were made in relation to her immobile corpse as part of the narrative. Yet, Cecilia continued to maintain this position for a good portion of the ludic activity (lines 1-75), only completely reviving when Peter had died and was no longer available to revive her (line 76-78). Protecting or defending one's body is impossible in such a ludic moment without violating the parameters of the narrative: corpses don't move. The suggestion here is that not only was this play a deeply embodied experience, but the sensuous aspects of this ludic moment can in part account for its intensity. As I will argue in section 7.3, such intensities are significant when considering the impact of death/violence play on players' everyday selves, but before doing so I will consider the emplaced citations flowing between dialogic bodies.

7.2.2 Emplaced citations

Thus far, I have suggested that play characters and narratives are intensely embodied. In what follows, I will consider the dialogic nature of this embodiment through consideration of the double-bodied citations taken up in this critical moment, including their conditions of possibility: in other words, what potential characters and embodied actions were available to the players in the context of Westside Nursery. This will involve particular attention to changes in citations as a result of the shifting others who turned their gaze on the ludic activity, the anticipated persuasiveness of acts, and the dialogic responses of others. Whilst there were many citations which were introduced and worked through this critical moment, for the purposes of this discussion I will focus on citations involved in the 'revival'.

7.2.2.1 Revivals 1: Peter and Cecilia (lines 1-16)

In the first part of this play narrative, when Peter responded to Cecilia's death, his embodied actions appeared caring and careful. Peter's pumping motions (lines 4-5) gestured to the CPR process; unlike CPR in the everyday world, however, the actions were gentle and tender as if imbued with love and affection rather than the impersonal force involved in attempting to manually pump blood throughout a person's entire body. It might be suggested, following the logic of developmentalism, that in combination with Peter's pursed lips on Cecilia's cheek (line 6) this was a misunderstanding of CPR –

replacing breaths of air with a kiss and repeatedly pushing on her stomach rather than chest. Certainly, this is possible; however, such an interpretation is complicated by his caring attentiveness. This carried an image of the chaste kiss of the Prince hoping to revive Sleeping Beauty. Later, Peter referred to his actions specifically as kissing (lines 44-45), suggesting that indeed the ludic action gestured to the presumed magic of 'true (heterosexual) love' able to conquer even mortality as it is conveyed in the Sleeping Beauty tale.

That these actions may have cited discourses of 'true (heterosexual) love' can be supported by the particular relational quality which was enacted in this moment. Moments of 'true love' are often imbued in popular culture and common-sense with idealised qualities where time and the outside world supposedly recede and the relationship itself becomes amplified (Hennessy, 2000). Indeed, Peter and Cecilia were closely focused on each other, seemingly unaware of their surroundings including the others within it, creating a sense of a secret stolen moment removed from other interactions in the busy Nursery. This moment certainly seemed to be read as a 'private' interchange by the other children. Although others were present and nearby, including Kakali who was often with Cecilia when both were at Westside Nursery, there were no attempts to enter the narrative being enacted by Peter and Cecilia until after Peter departed (line 18). This was unusual given the busy and mobile engagements generally observed in the setting.

Whilst the 'secret-ness' being conveyed in the play was likely 'read' as such by the other children given the distance they kept, Peter and Cecilia's later actions suggest that the 'outside' world was, in actuality, exceedingly present for them. Peter's comment to me, 'I think she's dead' (line 9), was accompanied by such a smooth movement, his direct gaze indicating that he was unsurprised by my presence and knew exactly where I was sitting. Not only does this suggest that being watched seems to have become such a 'normal' experience of childhood in early years settings that it is no longer remarkable, Peter's seamless integration of me into the plot indicated that their play took place in full knowledge that their practices were, or at least had the potential for being, noticed.

The Bakhtinian notion of audience offers a way to begin to interrogate the importance of the context in interpreting the use of particular citations in particular moments. From this perspective, Peter and Cecilia's actions cannot only be seen as a dialogue only with each other and those narratives they reference. Being dialogic, they are also anticipatory of the responses of the broader (potential) audience: in other words, they include consideration, even curiosity, of how others might interpret and respond to the

embodied action. In this case, their active citation of discourses of 'true heterosexual love', with the insular intimacy such idealised narratives convey, were perhaps enacted as a way to protect their 'fragile' interactive play space (Corsaro, 1985) from their anticipated audience: other players. Although such citations offered no guarantee for the actions of others, in this moment, they served to erect a barrier around Peter and Cecilia's engagements, keeping other children away.

7.2.2.2 Revivals 2: A group arrives (lines 17-46)

Peter's departure marked a shift in the narrative as a group of other children moved in to 'revive' Cecilia, who continued to lie motionless on the ground. In contrast to the insularity of the previous interactions, the larger group ushered in a more public attempt at revival, declared by the gathering of many bodies around Cecilia as well as the use of the sonic (line 18). As Finnegan (2002, p.88) notes, auditory modes can be effective in 'marshalling' people precisely because of their intrinsic properties: while it is notionally possible to keep out uninvited visuals by closing one's eyes or unwanted touch by moving away, it is very difficult to completely evade the sound of a child calling out loudly.

A variety of citations were made in this moment. Sabir's actions again referenced efforts to resuscitate through CPR (line 23) whilst Carl's repeated calls (line 18-19) gestured to the acts of distraught family and friends at the side of an unconscious loved one. Kakali's actions, however, were more ambivalent. Her hand gently placed on Cecilia's stomach (line 26-27) could have been an effort at healing touch, although her lack of motion and later reference to Cecilia's death (line 43) also suggest a sense of finality for Kakali in this moment.

Sabir's hard thrust into Cecilia's open and vulnerable body (line 25) was particularly noteworthy as the narrative progressed. As pointed out in Chapter 5, whilst it was not unusual for playful contact to turn into painful fights or punishing touch in death/violence play at Westside Nursery contradicted the other expressions of tender concern. The suddenness of Peter's actions on his return (line 27-28), however, seemed to create greater ripples, perhaps because of the marked contrast with his earlier revival attempts. While Cecilia did not refuse Peter's touch, his movements seem to shift the general sense of care and concern of the moment to a more ambivalent, even aggressive, interaction. In order to re-enter the ludic activity, both in terms of narrative and space, it was not necessary for Peter to climb up the length of Cecilia's body or hold her body immobile beneath him (line 30-32). It is possible to suggest that Peter – as with Sabir earlier – was merely hoping to provoke a reaction

from Cecilia; this, however, obscures interrogation of the availability of this precise citation and the particularity of the response it might have hoped to achieve. While his earlier kisses had gestured to a sanitised Disney-version of valiant Prince Charming saving the helpless Sleeping Beauty, a spuriously gendered saviour narrative, this was a much more explicitly sexualised and thematically-aggressive intervention.

It is important here to note that this is not an attempt to locate these as manifestations of Peter's unique nature or, worse, to suggest that he is pathologically 'over-sexualised'. Children often explore and attempt to make sense of sexuality. The tendency of adults to avoid discussion of sexuality and discourage sexual play in early childhood settings, however, often pushes such explorations underground where children end up relying primarily on each other's 'fragments' of knowledge (Robinson and Davies, 2010). My attempts at positioning myself in the setting as a 'least educator' perhaps made me privy to some of this activity; as became clear later on, Cecilia and Peter were aware that their sexualised touch may not have been acceptable to other adults. Cecilia asked me not to tell her father that she had kissed Peter and in the more formal indoor space Cecilia and Peter ensured they were hidden from adult view before engaging in a goodbye kiss. Interpreting this critical moment as an exploration of sexuality, although disruptive of the sanitised early childhood imaginary where sexuality and sexual knowledge are not only rendered 'irrelevant' but also a 'danger' to young children (Robinson and Davies, 2010, p.251), is only a starting point, however. Of import here are the changes in sexualised citations between the first and second revivals.

In this second phase of revivals, it is noteworthy that Cecilia and Peter's interactions had gone from being watched in a generalised sense within the heavily-surveilled early years setting – represented in this case by my video observation – to being watched by a specific group of children, including Kakali whom Peter knew was close friends with Cecilia. These other children were also seeking to be Cecilia's 'saviour', a position not easily given out within the peer culture and one that I had seen Cecilia bestow as a form of status attribution. It is here that Peter's more sexualised and aggressive citations, holding her body down and keeping her head in place to receive his hard kisses, served not only as a means of resuscitation but gestured to a passive female body subject to male control and possession. Peter may have drawn on this harsher citation as a way of demonstrating – in a visible and embodied sense – his particular relationship to Cecilia in front of the others, using the citation in an attempt to maintain his high status as 'saviour' and discourage others from attempting to do the same. Peter's loud explanation of Cecilia's death and revival attempts (line 44-45) also

seemed to secure this status: being the one to name what happened and identifying his individual attempt at revival was – like the physical hold – indicative of possession, in this case not only of Cecilia’s body but of the status as ‘saviour’. These embodied actions certainly provoked the departure of the other children from the ludic interactions (line 31-32). It did not, however, ensure Peter’s ‘saviour’ role, as Cecilia did not accept (line 36, 42) and potentially was even disturbed by this change in the revival sequence. Such actions made quick work of shattering any simple image of a passive female body subject to male domination. Despite a seeming familiarity amongst the children of the discursive positioning of the possessive male, the outcome of Peter’s citation was not predictable, lending weight to Bakhtin’s (1990) contention that there are always ‘loopholes’, an acknowledgement of the non-determined and unfinalisability of being which is not only constituted through relations of domination and inequality, as discussed above.

7.2.2.3 Revivals 3: Moving Cecilia (lines 47-77)

In combination with his declaration of the impossibility of Cecilia’s resurrection (line 44-45), Peter’s efforts to move Cecilia’s body (line 47) disrupted his saviour role with the introduction of the fallibility of his prowess. The return of the other children, and their collaborative efforts to move Cecilia’s corpse (lines 50-60), can be understood in light of this shift in the narrative. Of note is that this was the first time that Kaltrina became actively involved in the ludic activity (line 54): previously she had participated as an observant bystander. Kaltrina was often engaged in play close by or together with Peter, so it was significant that she joined Peter and Cecilia at a moment when their interactions were no longer framed by narratives of normative heterosexuality. In the sanitised romance of Sleeping Beauty as well as the more aggressively-sexualised citations which occurred later, there was little room for a non-sexualised female character.

The children’s alliance whilst moving Cecilia’s corpse came to an abrupt end, however, when Peter pulled Cecilia’s body into the small enclosed area (line 59-60). The new space served to again reconstitute the fragile sociospatial relations. It was a small space which was already filled by Peter and Cecilia. To fit inside, the children’s bodies would have been crammed together with no way to avoid touching. This did not stop Rafi and Carl from crawling in to sit next to Cecilia, but it did stop Kaltrina and Kakali. Here, physical boundaries appeared to reintroduce normative hetero-gendered relations. Whilst the two girls had entered this tight space with other children before, the impeding proximity may have been troubling or interpreted as excluding their participation given the previously heterosexualised narrative.

As the children pulled at and then carried Cecilia's corpse, she seemed to enjoy being the centre of interest (line 52) even though their actions (e.g. line 51-57) on the surface seemed to constitute her as an object – similar to a coveted toy in a heated playground struggle. At one level, her continued use of the death trope in the face of such treatment and the more invasive, sexualised teasing of the revival attempts reiterated a sense of her as a gendered body 'to which things are to be done' (Renold and Ringrose, 2011, p.396). Such a seemingly straightforward description of objectification, however, belies Cecilia's influence over the play narrative in part achieved through maintaining her own ludic death but also her efforts to shift responses to her body. Beyond maintaining the death pose, this was accomplished through her own self-revival (line 66-67). Whilst this action ensured the flow of the ludic narrative, her revival resulted in Peter's departure (line 68-69). This appeared to be neither expected nor desired as she quickly returned to reoccupy the role of corpse, using the death trope as a generative metaphor (line 69,75) (see Chapter 5), and significantly she added an offer of explicitly sexualised interaction: '*One time you can kiss me*' (line 74). Sitting up and issuing directives, she no longer embodied the 'passive' corpse upon whom the revival – sexual or otherwise – was being enacted. Much as the teen girls in Renold and Ringrose's (2011, p.402) ethnographic studies of online and everyday world negotiations, Cecilia's embodiments seemed to shift smoothly between contradictory poles of sexual passivity and 'feelings of pleasure and power in the becoming-sexual'. It is important to note, however, that the embodiments which Cecilia mobilised to influence the narrative, and specifically to maintain Peter's attention, were of either passive or hyper-sexualised femininity – citing long-standing normative (hetero)sexist ideologies and practices – rather than actually challenging or transforming inequitable gendered relations.

7.2.2.4 Revivals 4: Peter's death (lines 78-104)

In this final revival scene, Peter's sudden declaration of death (line 79) served to shift the play narrative again. This rapid alteration from saviour to corpse did not seem to particularly surprise any of the children. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 8, characters and narratives shifted rapidly and fluidly in much of the death/violence play at Westside Nursery: indeed, staying involved with the play seemed to require the ability to flexibly respond to such changes.

Whilst Cecilia's deaths only moments previously had provoked highly gendered citations invoking images of passive/hyper-sexualised femininity, this did not preclude Cecilia from taking on a saviour role. Notably, however, Cecilia's early resuscitation efforts were different from those adopted by Peter. Her gentle rubs back and forth on

Peter's stomach (line 81-82) as opposed to the up and down pumps he had used on her and her tender kiss on his forehead (line 90) rather than his lips or cheek referenced a gendered narrative of a different sort: a mother's caring touch at bedtime or for a sick child. Indeed, Peter's response (lines 103-104) to these embodied actions in the dialogic flow suggests that he too interpreted Cecilia's actions as a staging of a mother-child relationship.

This shift in citations can be accounted for in part by the discourses available to Peter and Cecilia in the context of this particular critical moment. Dominant cultural narratives rarely offer accounts of female saviours of male partners; on the other hand, a mother's efforts to save her young has far more common currency. Indeed, in this moment, the 'saviour' seemed to demand a subject-position construed as less vulnerable and of higher status in inequitable social relations: a boy compared to a girl or a mother compared to a child. Whilst this repositioning of the saviour relationship in terms of generation made Cecilia's revival attempts more intelligible in this moment, they remained locked in a hierarchical logic. Rather than playing at a girl rescuing a boy, which may have challenged the way being a saviour is concatenated with hegemonic masculinity, Cecilia's actions drew on generational markers where vulnerability is linked to childhood. In this way, neither hegemonic masculinity nor generational authority was called into question.

At the same time, Cecilia's pinning of Peter's hands (line 89) – however gently – made her gestures to motherhood more ambivalent. Indeed, a counter-narrative ran alongside the mother-child revival moving between Peter and Cecilia. Whilst Peter and Cecilia seemed to account for their change in roles largely based on a generational positioning, the deaths of Rafi (line 83) and Carl (line 87-88) staged a different type of relationship. That Rafi died only after Peter switched roles and died was significant in the dialogic flow, setting up a gendered division where Cecilia was the 'saviour' of the three boys whilst the three boys had saved her, but not each other. Although there were many same-sex revivals at other times in Westside Nursery, in this critical moment this did not seem possible, with the potential exception of Kakali (line 26); although, as I have already suggested, her hand on Cecilia's stomach was an ambivalent attempt at revival at most. The timing of Rafi's death served to re-introduce a normative heterosexual narrative, accounting in part for Cecilia's shifting revivals. Kissing Rafi on the lips 'made sense' in the flow of a sexualised rather than parenting narrative, and in this shift Cecilia re-instantiated a seeming status or 'dominance' through a hyper-sexualised positioning, exemplified in the way she pushed Rafi down prior to kissing him (line 92-93).

This close interrogation of a critical moment, drawing on a conceptualisation of ‘dialogic bodies’, has provided an account of the intensities and complexities of embodied ludic interactions. Such a dialogue takes place through citations of the everyday world and its enduring inequalities; the conditions such enactments render (im)possible in ludic activity; the anticipatory nature of embodied actions which includes attention to shifting ‘audiences’, both present and imagined; and, the specificity of emplaced moments which impel attending to material spaces in which ludic activity occurs. In the critical moment, whilst Cecilia moved flexibly between characters and dispositions – trying on ‘possible selves’ as Edmiston (2008) posits – the selves which were available were predominantly those existing within the constraints of dominant female subject positionings: passive femininity, hyper-sexualised femaleness, and idealised motherhood. These dialogic embodiments meant that, in practice, certain things were possible in the ludic world and others not. Given the argument that has been put forward thus far in regard to the porousness of play and everyday worlds, (im)possibilities in play can have consequences beyond the ludic world and it is to this point that I now move.

7.3 The possibilities of (dis)identifications beyond the ludic world

To this point, I have highlighted the importance of attending to embodied personhood generally and to somatic intensities involved in ludic activity specifically. I have utilised the notion of dialogic bodies as a way to understand the citations which are enacted as players dialogue with others and the broader social order. The final section of this chapter will develop this line of analysis considering the implications of embodied ludic enactments for everyday personhood. This argument is constituted in three parts. First, embodied ludic selves are not easily separated from everyday world selves: what is experienced in one world is also felt in the other. Ludic and everyday selfhood inevitably becomes entangled as players embody these selves synchronically, as noted in section 7.2.1. These selves ‘lend... meaning to the other’ (Davies, 1989, p.18) through a dialogic encounter between ludic and everyday selves as well as with the wider audience and social order.

Second, enacting characters in play serves to render affects, sociospatial relations, and dispositions plausible in the everyday (Davies, 1989). This is not to argue at a literal level that the presence of narrative of killing means that children will grow up to kill others or, to highlight the preposterousness of such a claim in even more blatant terms, that to play a dragon opens up the possibility of being a dragon in everyday life. Instead the point is that particular subject positions – such as the child subject as a ‘player’; the

boy child as 'rough and tumble'; the passive, nice, good girl – enacted in play as well as the specific embodied postures, movements, dispositions, and affects may be opened up for players and indeed those watching the play. Notably, this happens through interactive and dialogic encounters between players and between players and the more-than-social world.

Third, the notion of 'identification' within embodied dialogues offers a way to understand the way in which players' complex attachments to the social relations, subject positions, and dispositions made possible in play may be carried through to the everyday world. Whilst much identification is with hegemonic and inequitable social relations, the contestive nature of ludic activity has the potential to allow players to create and enact new social imaginaries and open up spaces of disidentification. This argument will be employed to address the seeming incommensurability between arguments introduced at the beginning of this chapter which contradictorily suggest death/violence play is central to the formation of ethical selves (Edmiston, 2008) or produces hegemonic selves (Browne, 2004). In essence, I will suggest that neither of these is an inevitable, nor exclusive, outcome of death/violence play.

7.3.1 The relationship between imagined and everyday selves: a process of (counter)identification?

In considering the relationship between ludic and everyday selves, and here I will focus on Cecilia and Peter's relational selves, it is instructive to provide a sense of their prior and later interactions. Notably, these were relations enacted *in my presence* and whilst I did not 'cause' them, certainly my presence was part of the dialogic flows which were operating.

Prior to this critical moment, I had rarely observed Peter and Cecilia engaging in more than passing interactions with each other during the course of the day. Cecilia often played with Kakali, and could often be seen pulling her around by the hand to begin a new activity whilst Peter could generally be found involved in active, imaginative play with Paul and other play partners. Peter and Cecilia were in different 'key person groups', and therefore did not sit together in the transition to lunch, at lunch, or at pick up time. However, for most of their joint time at the setting, Peter and Cecilia were in the same story group. That said, both Peter and Cecilia had each individually mentioned their relationship to me – both in glowing and disgusted terms: 'love', 'girl/boyfriend', and the giver or receiver of kisses. Peter and Cecilia had both chosen the other's photograph when asked in interviews who they liked to play with at

Westside Nursery. In a sense then the ludic activities in the critical moment were 'unusual' according to my observations, but were consistent with the articulated relationship between the two.

A few weeks after the critical moment, I invited Cecilia and Peter to view the video and be interviewed. Cecilia asked to bring Kaltrina with them and I agreed, reasonably comfortable ethically with this situation as Kaltrina had been nearby or present during most of the activity:

As we walked into the interview room, the three children sat down on the floor. Peter sat in the middle and immediately put his arms around the two girls. While I began setting up the video, he kissed Kaltrina on the cheek. She looked away and wiped her cheek with her shirt. Peter turned and held Cecilia's face in his hands and kissed her lips. She wiped her lips and giggled: 'Stop kissing!' Turning around and seeing the kissing, I commented: 'Peter, you're going to need to see the computer here.' He responded, 'OK,' and turned forward, wiping his mouth.

When the video was finished, I asked what they thought of it. Cecilia responded in a serious tone: 'That was nice. Because I was dead. I was 'on' now because Peter was kissing me. I'm not dead now.' I asked: 'What does the kiss mean?' Cecilia responded: 'Peter says it makes me not dead.' Peter had been waiting, indicating a desire to add to the conversation: 'Cecilia only needed to kiss me one time. There weren't too many kisses.'

He turned and whispered to Cecilia: 'If I'm dead, don't kiss Rafi. If you're near to Rafi, don't even kiss him.' Cecilia nodded and smiled. I asked: 'Why not?' Peter replied: 'If she's going to kiss Rafi then I don't love her.' Cecilia hugged Peter and put her legs on his lap.

(18th June 2012)

In reading the shifts in these three sets of data – observations prior to the critical moment, the critical moment itself, and the following interview – the change in physical interactions, particularly as framed with normative hetero-gendered discourses, is noteworthy. This is not to suggest that this critical moment was solely responsible for the changes observed in Peter and Cecilia's relationship. I am, however, contending that the critical moment made possible a particular set of social relations which were less available previously and which carried through to the everyday world through the process of 'identification'.

In considering an individual's relationship to subject positions within social relations, Pêcheux (1982) theorises three distinctive 'modalities': identification, counteridentification, and disidentification (which I will discuss further below).

'Identification' refers to the 'taking up'³⁷ of positions which coincide with dominant ideologies. This 'good subject' unquestioningly tries to emulate those positions considered normal and desirable for the social order, and accepts the subject-form itself. Peter and Cecilia's interactions in the critical moment enacted 'good subject' positions, including the diligent worker cum first aider, the romanticised heterosexual couple-love of Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty, the powerful male saviour, and the idealised mother-child bond. In contrast, Cecilia's enactment of what might be constituted as hyper-sexualised femininity or Peter's citations of aggressive male sexuality might be constituted as 'counteridentifications', where the 'bad subject' rebels against or challenges dominant ideologies. Identifying these as 'counteridentifications' is slightly problematic here given that 'for young women today in post-feminist cultures, the display of a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency has become normative—indeed, a 'technology of sexiness' has replaced 'innocence' and 'virtue' as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace' (Gill, 2007, p.72) and indeed parallel arguments could be made in relation to aggressive male sexuality. These points notwithstanding, for very young children sexual knowledge is still relatively considered taboo (Robinson and Davies, 2010), and the crucial point to make here is that just as with the 'good subject', counteridentifications leave the subject-form (as the site where ideologies work) intact and therefore the social order largely unaffected.

In ludic activity, through embodied dialogue, players may (counter)identify with inequitable social relations and hegemonic discourses; this has resultant implications beyond the play. In the movement from the critical moment to the interview, it is noticeable, for instance, that both Cecilia and Peter seemed to identify with the gendered and normative hetero-gendered discourses which infused the play narratives. Whilst there was a great deal of narrative movement in the critical moment, they restaged particular aspects of their ludic selves in the everyday context, framing love, relationships, and revival/rescue in particularly hegemonic terms and enacting these understandings in an embodied manner which was not previously observed in their interactions. The exchange of kisses and touch between Peter and Cecilia, as well as Peter and Kaltrina, suggest identifications with the hetero-gendered assumptions in the critical moment. Peter's imperative – '*If you're near to Rafi, don't even kiss him.*' – to

³⁷ Pêcheux (1982, p.121) uses the expression 'taking up a position' cautiously, not intended as an indication of 'originary action' but as a subject effect of ideology in which the individual is 'interpellated as "responsible-subject"' (Pêcheux, 1982, p.156). On this account, the possibility for transformation is located in the contradictions between ideologies which imply the impossibility of permanent or uniform interpellations. Whilst the presence of contradiction is consistent with the account offered throughout this thesis, Pêcheux (1982) dispenses with any sense of agency, contra the position taken in this thesis via critical realism and the work of the Bakhtinian circle.

which Cecilia concurred carried traces of their embodied citations in the ludic activity which constituted the female body as a male possession to control and direct. The declaration, *'If she's going to kiss Rafi then I don't love her,'* indicated an identification with subject positions where love and revival are constituted as individualised and propertied relations.

Cecilia's sexualised responses (giggling in response to the kiss and hugging and placing her legs over Peter), which amplified during the course of the interview, were suggestive of her embodied (counter)identifications with the apparent authority and influence she accessed through sexualised acts during the death/violence play. Here, Žižek's (2000) distinction between 'imaginary identification', or identification with the image or person who I want to be so that I can be likeable to myself, and 'symbolic identification' becomes important. For in part what is 'likeable' is motivated by the sense of pleasing a 'third gaze': this is 'symbolic identification'. The 'third gaze' references some type of imagined authority, as instantiated by hegemonic ideologies, but the notion of audience introduced above can also be understood as a form of a 'third gaze'. In the critical moment above, and indeed in the interview which followed, my continued presence, video observation, and desire to subject the moment to interrogation in an interview could have constituted a form of a third gaze by indicating an interest and attributing importance to their ludic acts. In other words, identification with these hetero-gendered social relations may have been partially impelled by the attention I gave to the relations enacted in the critical moment. Possibly even more compelling, however, were the responses Peter and Cecilia received to their actions in the critical moment. For instance, it was Cecilia's restaging of the hyper-sexual/passive femininity couplet which both maintained Peter's presence and appeared to interest and motivate the active participation of Rafi and Carl. Her self-revival technique (line 66-67), which did not draw on the same binary poles of femininity, did not result in the same responses in the dialogic flow. In other words, Cecilia may have symbolically identified with dominant constructions of femininity because of a desire to 'please' the three boys, which in the case of the immediate dialogic relations meant maintaining their presence and attention.

It is important to note, however, that in (counter)identifying with a position "for the boys", as desired sexual object and desiring sexual subject' (Renold and Ringrose, 2011, p.400), Cecilia's citations reinforced inequitable hetero-gendered relations, where sexuality operates as an outer limit of possibility for authority, influence, and resistance when linked to femininity. Further, these (counter)identifications do not necessarily contest the subject-form. Caring and touch in this critical moment are,

however, simultaneously suggestive of the possibility for disidentification in ludic activity which the chapter will now move on to discuss.

7.3.2 The possibilities of disidentification

The final modality Pêcheux (1982, p.159) offers in conceptualising an individual's relationship to dominant subject positions is that of 'disidentification' which 'constitutes a *working* (transformation-displacement) of the *subject-form* and not just its *abolition*'. Abolition of the subject-form is impossible, he asserts, as this implies that there is an 'end to ideology'. Disidentification, then, is not just about people changing how they relate to dominant ideologies (as in the first two modalities) but about historicising and transforming the inequitable social relations with which people identify. This is a:

...critical practice that de-reifies identity by opening the identity form "I am" to history. This does not mean a simple renunciation of identities—gay, straight, man, woman—but a critical working on them to make visible their historical and material conditions of possibility. (Hennessy, 2000, p.230)

Disidentification in the work of Pêcheux and Hennessy is primarily taken up in relation to a radical, Marxist politics committed to a collective 'anti-capitalist project' (Hennessy, 2000, p.231). Regardless, the concept offers a way to begin thinking about the way that the transformative nature of ludic activity has the potential to create new, even radical, social imaginaries and enact alternative forms of social relations (see also Katz, 2004).

To explore the possibilities of play as a space for disidentification, and transformation of social relations, I will return to the critical moment which has formed the nucleus of this chapter. Notwithstanding any of the points made above about normative heterosexuality and aggressive masculinities, there was simultaneously a potentiality for transformation in the way that death in the ludic activity provoked and enabled close physical proximity. Whilst my early fieldnotes about death/violence play were replete with comments about the physical proximity of the children's play – where entangled bodies in close spaces made breath, scent, and touch central to the experience – the presence of a 'death' in the narrative seemed to do more. It made intimate touch permissible, rather than just a by-product of small spaces filled with many bodies; but even more, it demanded intimate touch.

When the children in the critical moment above died, they seemed to anticipate – or at least hope for – a healing response from others. Their deaths occurred in open spaces and in front of others, often directly in their path as in Cecilia's original demise (line 1).

Regardless of the narrative theme of the death/violence play, virtually every revival or healing response involved close physical contact. This suggests that revival became associated with a variety of forms of close and intimate physical contact amongst players at Westside Nursery. There seemed to be little concern that intimate touch would be misinterpreted, disavowed, or negatively responded to by the child who died. This acceptance of touch sits in stark contrast to the uncertain status of physical touch at other times during death/violence play: players may have positioned themselves in close proximity but that did not preclude pushing and anger at another's touch in these moments.

The death trope, then, served not only as a generative metaphor generally (see Chapter 5) but as a provocation for intimate physical contact, an affordance of the at-risk or in-need corpse symbolised by a motionless and defenceless body. The point here is not to argue that death/violence play is the only time children initiate any form of physical intimacy but to point to the way that the death trope emerged as a particular way in which caring touch from others was provoked at Westside Nursery. Notably, the embodied invitation for physical proximity and touch was issued to peers. In part this contention draws its weight from the context of early childhood settings in the 'First World/North' where play is primarily constructed as the purview of children (Ailwood, 2003). It has a particular resonance in Westside Nursery as educators rarely engaged in extended periods of ludic activity with children (see Chapter 4) and where death operated as an 'absent presence' (see Chapter 5).

A number of disidentifications, or at least the seeds of disidentification, are figured within these practices. On a basic level, these ludic practices echo charges that requirements for 'personal space' are socially constructed, not just in terms of how much space is needed but in terms of whether bodily 'space' is needed at all. Perhaps, more fundamentally then, the use of the death trope challenges the insistence in Western, and certainly Anglo-North American settings, about maintaining and developing a sense of corporeal containment, linked to individualism and separateness from others. Familiar directives issued in early years settings including Westside Nursery such as: '*Move over and give Jenny space*', '*Keep your hands on your own body*', or '*You can pretend to fight but don't touch each other's bodies*' exemplify this in a very concrete way. An emphasis on developing a sense of a bounded body lingers beneath many other common practices in the UK (e.g. see Jones *et al.*, 2010b), such as requiring children to sit with their bodies separated at group times. These policies and practices have their roots in ideas about what constitutes appropriate behaviour and 'school-readiness' where children's proximity and touch is seen to be disorderly

and therefore threatening to underlying assumptions that 'order precedes learning' (see also Jones *et al.*, 2010b; Phelan, 1997, p.77).

Elias (1994) refers to efforts to contain and privatise the body as a process of 'progressive individualization', a social process of modernity rather than natural necessity. The 'self in a case', Elias (1994, p.207) argues, is produced through 'civilizing' processes where bodily matters are increasingly regulated and subject to social taboos in efforts to, for instance, delineate humanity in opposition to animality which the supposedly unclean or untamed body threatens and as a way of attributing value or status to 'mannered', and essentially classed, bodies. Self-regulation of bodily action, affect, and even corporeality itself comes to be so taken-for-granted that people do not question these 'habits'; those who violate such modes of being, however, are considered either 'impossible' and 'pathological' or children who will learn the desired etiquette, ultimately reinforcing the separation and indeed denigration of childhood (Elias, 1994, p.116). This process of separating bodies serves to build affective walls between people and their bodies, as well as their bodies and others (Shilling, 2003). The emphasis on corporeal and psychic individualising processes links to what Smith (1996) refers to as capitalism's 'subject of value' characterised by individualism and 'economic rationality', where human relations are based on comparison of the 'objective' values of the objects and attributes we 'possess' in our individual selves whilst the labour which makes them possible is obscured. 'Subjects of value' presuppose 'valueless' subjects: 'various orders of otherness' such as those (often gendered) who provide 'non-self-interested' care for others (Smith, 1996, p.350). The use of the death trope in Westside Nursery to provoke such 'non-self-interested' caring touch can be seen in this light to strain at both corporeal containment and the individualistic capitalist subject of value. Indeed, Manning (2007, p.xviii) argues that touch is a 'reaching toward' which 'at its most political... is to create a concept for unthinking the individual as a discrete entity...mov[ing] toward something that is not yet'.

The use of the death trope in this and other critical moments also challenges notions of children as fundamentally dependent on independent adults. In generational relations shaped by such perspectives, care is constituted as that which is provided by adults for children. In early childhood settings, for instance, the influence of attachment theorising has been widely interpreted as a dyadic relationship between educator and child in which care is undertaken by the educator (Pearson and Degotardi, 2009). In contrast, players' uses and responses to the death trope at Westside Nursery was suggestive of their desires to be intimately cared for by other children, at very least within ludic

spaces. The, often caring, responses suggest that young children are capable of 'attentiveness' (Tronto, 1989, p.177), an effort of awareness to the particular needs of another through caring touch as well as other more affective/emotional means. Whilst these relations of caring and revival took place in the ludic world, the embodied nature of imaginative play allows for the affective and haptic sensations of caring relations to traverse into player's everyday world selves.

People's needs for relations with others, affect, and sensation hold great potential for radical political projects, Hennessy (2000) contends. She points to the way that such needs are reified, masking the way emotion and desire are organised and met in an internationally stratified and gendered division of labour, consumer culture, and, taking into account the point above, I would add the generational order. Such reification obfuscates 'how capitalism has outlawed the meeting of so many basic human needs: for food, housing, health care, and also for love and affection, education, leisure time' (Hennessy, 2000, p.228). By 'outlawed needs' she is referring to those aspects of human life which are not met or recognised in the wage system, such as 'private' domestic caring work. Beyond critique, she points to the way such 'outlawed needs' are central to the 'formation of oppositional collective subjects' (Hennessy, 2000, p.35), an affective as well as cognitive process, and the development of other possibilities for ways of organising social relations.

To sum up then, I am suggesting that the use of the death trope to provoke proximity and touch from other children can be seen as the seeds of disidentification: a 'working on' the processes whereby generational and individualising 'capitalist subject of value' positions are formed, as well as being constitutive of other forms of social relations: both caring for and being cared for by others; affected by and affecting others. For in the act of caring and revival, it is possible to understand the player(s) as bringing a sense of value and meaning to the child-corpse which exceeds an instrumental and individualising logic: an act of answerability in Bakhtinian terms (see section 3.3). Perhaps this provides an explanation of Cecilia's wistful smile (line 7) in response to Peter's revivals and the continued use of the death trope in this critical moment and beyond. The gathering of players around a 'corpse', a coming together of bodies in space, offers something of what Bakhtin (1984b, p.23) describes in relation to the Medieval Carnival where people could feel themselves, at least momentarily, as part of a bigger whole rather than 'atomized' and alienated: an embodied sense of social collectivity.

7.3.3 The concurrence of (dis)identifications

In returning to the debate which opened this chapter, where death/violence play was contradictorily seen to allow for the formation of ethical identifies on the one hand and hegemonic identifications on the other, the implicit argument here has been that whilst both are possible neither is an inevitable, nor exclusive, outcome. In developing the argument that play and everyday worlds are synchronic and porously bounded, the chapter has proposed that a series of contradictory and deeply embodied (counter)identifications and disidentifications took place within and beyond the ludic world. In the critical moment that this chapter has revolved around, participants' dialogic bodies enacted and potentially (counter)identified with normative heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, passive/hyper-sexualised femininity, and propertied notions of relationships. At the same time, seeds of disidentifications were noted in the way that children used the death trope to promote proximity, touch, and physical connection – a form of 'resilience' if not implicit 'reworking' (Katz, 2004) of individualism and the gendered and generational naturalisation of care work, as well as an embodied imagining of more collective and caring social relations. This suggests a concurrence, rather than mutual exclusivity, of various forms of identification, not surprising given the conflicting and contradictory nature of ideological interpellations.

What is noteworthy here is that the ludic activity opened up possibilities for disidentification which in many ways were less available during the interview. This can be understood in part by the nature of the activities. The interview format was more formal, structured, and predictable and required verbal modes of communication whilst play can be characterised by its transformation, with its theoretically unlimited potentials. In many ways, then, play offers the possibility of less entrenched constraints and more distance from everyday inequalities in the social order, notwithstanding the on-going contention of this thesis that the ludic is not entirely contingent or removed from the everyday world in its practice. Further, this chapter has also pointed to the intensity of embodied engagements in this critical moment, as well as much of the death/violence play at Westside Nursery; one implication of this is that identifications (of all three modalities) were particularly profound and compelling. It is for these reasons, that I will go on to suggest that death/violence play (indeed play more broadly) can be viewed as a site of radical potential (see Chapter 9), keeping in mind the possibilities for (counter)identifications whilst working to nurture the potential of disidentification.

CHAPTER 8: **Transformable characters and the contradictions of flexible selves**

The previous two chapters laid out an argument that ludic and everyday worlds are experienced simultaneously, with their porous boundaries traversed by ideologies, affects, and embodied being. Chapter 6 argued the social categories players were inscribed by in the everyday were often used as a constitutive limit for character possibilities in death/violence play. Conversely, play characters, such as monsters and the monstrous, were mapped on to everyday inequalities, becoming mobile resources for some players and inscribed on to the bodies of others. Chapter 7 looked more specifically at the question of personhood and the (counter)identifications players made with characters, dispositions, and narratives through a process of dialogic embodiment. Whilst the critical moment explored in the chapter suggested that the players (counter)identified with social relations linked to normative heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and propertied relations, the chapter also suggested that play – as a transformative engagement with the world – offers potentials for embodied disidentification: from individualism, the reduction of relationships to terms of economic calculation, as well as gendered and generationed aspects of care. These chapters work together to begin problematising dichotomous debate over death/violence play, which asserts that it is fundamentally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for children, arguments which either elide or unduly separate the ludic from the everyday.

The present chapter will build upon the arguments offered thus far about the ambiguous relationship between children’s death/violence play in Westside Nursery and everyday world inequalities through consideration of a particular potential aspect of personhood: flexibility. Character flexibility and indeed transformability was a significant feature of the death/violence play at Westside Nursery with child-players often shifting, replacing, or remixing ludic characters during the course of a narrative.³⁸ The conditions of recognisability for this character fluidity, in other words how such flexibility ‘worked’ in the midst of collective play narratives, will be considered in relation to the peer cultures at Westside Nursery, as well as to sociospatial relations operating at other scalar levels including global popular culture and a national emphasis on children as flexible ‘citizen-workers of the future’ (Lister, 2003). The chapter will conclude by

³⁸ These are not necessarily characteristics only of death/violence play to the exclusion of other genres of play. Given that death/violence play was the focus of my data generation, it is the use of flexible characters in this genre discussed here.

considering the contradictory status of fluidity in a conjuncture of 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey, 2007).

8.1 Shifting, replacing, and remixing ludic characters

A critical moment from my fieldjournal will serve as a starting point for this discussion:

The play today moved in fits and starts. Kaltrina's cry: 'There's a bear in the woods!' launched a range of responses. Some children shouted out the names of the play characters they were becoming: 'I'm Venom!' and 'I'm Supergirl!' Some began running around the outdoor space: however, it remained unclear (at least to me) why they were running, who was chasing whom, and whether a bear was at all involved. Others hid behind the block carts and in the trees, jumping out to join the runners at various points.

It was only when Zach declared himself to be monster and set out chasing and clawing at the others that a slightly more obvious collective narrative was launched. A group of children decided to build a trap to catch and kill monster-Zach, tying long ropes between the opposing sides of the monkey bars. Although originally intended for monster-Zach, children in various characters got caught in the trap, calling for help and rescue.

Just as quickly as the trap brought children together, the group began dispersing across the outdoor space once again, ostensibly in search of the marauding monster. Again the movement travelled in all directions, seemingly dis-ordered and chaotic. Although in seeing the motion, other children in the setting joined in, possibly united in the exhilarating speed of the run rather than a shared narrative (which still required negotiation, at least at an embodied level, to coordinate such fast and tangential movement).

It was in this moment of searching that Sonic Hedgehog-Paul dropped to the ground in 'death' position. His death caused a commotion, given the 'value' placed on him in the setting, and produced a collective effort to bring him back to life. One child waved a magic wand, another fed him medicine, and still another attempted CPR.

But, Sonic Hedgehog-Paul was not to be revived. He whispered, 'Just leave me now and when I am not dead I will follow in your footsteps.' Peter ignored this imperative and crouched down over Sonic Hedgehog-Paul to press on his chest (in the familiar CPR citation). Sonic Hedgehog-Paul pushed Peter off and yelled: 'Get away!'

In response, the group of child-rescuers backed off and resumed their disjointed search for the monster. Meanwhile Sonic Hedgehog-Paul popped back up, declaring himself a new character. He repeated this process throughout the morning: without provocation (from my perspective) dropping to the ground dead (arms out, eyes closed) and then arising again as a new character, shifting from Sonic Hedgehog to Iron Man, Dr. Who, and Sabretooth.

After their initial attempts at rescuing Paul, the others left him dead on the ground. When he rejoined them announcing his new character, the search for the monster continued as though he had never left.

(Fieldnote, 9th January 2012)

In considering this critical moment, two primary points will provide the backdrop for discussion in this chapter. The seeming 'disorder' of the ludic activity is described in some detail in the fieldnote. The rapid, multi-directional movement and varied interjections in the narrative provoked a large degree of uncertainty in relation to coordinating action and expectations about how other players would respond. Such fluidity often happened in the death/violence play I observed and was also remarked upon by the educators:

It is quite exciting, social. A big group with you all joining in. That feeling of belonging... Running and chasing and laughing together.... A way of engaging where they don't need too much language, even if you don't speak same language. Quite often weapons play – guns and shooting each other – it tends to be in big groups. It starts off smaller. Then a few children notice what is going on and think: "Oh that looks good". They join in. It builds up into a big group....

(Interview, Kelly, 11th July 2011)

A second and related point has to do with Paul's shifting between various characters within the same play episode; this rendered the play narrative and his participation in it open and even indeterminate, making the other player's recognition and easy acceptance of these character changes noteworthy.

Paul's use of the death trope seemed to allow him, and indeed the others who appeared to readily accept his new characters, an explanation for his embodiment of shifting characters within the storyline, without necessitating the introduction of a new play narrative, setting, or set of social relations. In other words, the storyline of searching for a monster – however loosely formed it was – carried on, despite being inhabited by new characters, characters which in the everyday world or in their media origins may have required new environments or prompted different relational configurations. For instance, in the X-Men series, Sabretooth is primarily depicted as a villain, a paid assassin from the not-too-distant future with superhuman senses and deadly claws and fangs. In contrast, Sonic Hedgehog is a protagonist involved in saving the world from domination by powerful villains with his speed and ability to do wild jumps and flips. Despite inhabiting these two very different, and indeed potentially opposed characters, Paul maintained a similar relationship to the others and the play narrative throughout: a collaborator in the fragmented search for the monster.

The critical moment above was not the only time when the children fluidly shifted between characters and indeed character transformability seemed to be, somewhat paradoxically, an organising narrative in death/violence play. Such transformation was

not only 'explained' by the use of the death trope. A few weeks after the critical moment above, Paul made reference to video games by way of explanation for his character shifts: *'It's just like my dad's computer game. When you die, you go to a new game [as a new character].'* Another time, he explained: *'I am Sabretooth and never get scared. If I get hurt, I just change into another one.'* He pointed to a spot on his arm which, once touched, allowed him to change into Venom or Carnage. This 'changing spot' was referenced by a number of children, for instance Rafi occasionally wore a band of cloth tied around his arm which allowed him to transform into a new character. He would touch the arm band, shake uncontrollably, and then become a new character. Ian, on the other, replaced his characters through the use of a 'changing room' as in this second critical moment:

After wandering around for some time as a polar bear, Ian declared: 'I'm turning into something else! I don't know what! I'm going into the change room.'

He moved to the side of the outdoor space, turned his back on the other players, and stood completely still. Returning to the scene of play, he announced in a halting, robotic voice: 'Now I am an Ice Man. Ice is all around me. I cannot melt except in fire. No – wait. I am Fire Man. There is fire all around me.'

Azar responded: 'If you put water on him you will never see him again!' She lifted a 'hose' and sprayed water on him while explaining to me: 'I put water on him because he's always fighting.' Ian curled up in a little ball then slid off along the ground.

After a few moments away (in his change room?), Ian ran back: 'I am just ice. No one can melt me – only really hot things!'

(Fieldnote, 18th June 2012)

In many cases, as in Ian's second transformation, character changes were not explained but were merely declared to the group. Very occasionally, and only amongst children who had extensive experience of playing together, one child would transform another into a new character. Paul, for example, used a gun to transform Peter from soldier to Black Panther to Hulk (26th March 2012). In other words, children did not 'stick' to particular characters even within a continuous play narrative; although, as noted in Chapter 6, characters stuck to particular children.

Embodied characters were not only easily shifted or replaced, but they were often 'remixed'. Claiming a character did not mean ardent adherence to the dispositions, abilities, and orientations which generally would have been associated with it, notwithstanding points made in Chapter 6 about the way that normative and restrictive social categories often served as constitutive limits for children's character possibilities. In the ludic activity, characters were often hybridised forms of, for instance, their

popular culture references: Spiderman often carried a gun and Supergirl's powers were available as commodities to be purchased from a store (30th January 2012). Other players also did not insist that character take-ups were 'realistic' enactments of cultural references:

In the midst of play, Gerome declared, 'I'm not a monster anymore. I'm War Machine. I kill baddies.' Paul turned and whispered to me: 'War machine is a baddie.' He returned to the play and interacted with Gerome as a fellow 'goodie', implicitly accepting Gerome's 'inaccurate' use of War Machine.

(Fieldnote, 19th March 2012)

Despite the easy disposal and remixing of characters, this disordered or shifting death/violence play had an embodied intensity to it similar to that discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, the replaceability of characters in the critical moments above were responses to moments of intense crisis and suggested a desire to continue the play narrative rather than end it.

8.2 The recognisability of character flexibility

The discussion thus far has sought to demonstrate the noticeable fluidity in the characters being embodied in a singular play episode as well as flexibility in the way characters were taken up: character transformations were common. One reading of the staccato flows of this play, drawing on ideas in developmental psychology, might be that this group of young children did not yet have the capacity to develop storylines guided by conventions of narrative structure or character coherence.³⁹ This reading of the critical moment above may be accurate; however, many of the children involved took part in seemingly more coherent play narratives and character embodiments at other times. More consequentially, interrogation at the level of the individual's developmental trajectory, based on presumptions of predictable teleology which have been critiqued elsewhere (Burman, 2008b), serves to render a series of other questions invisible: lines of exploration which have import regardless of players' development or narrative understandings. For one of the noteworthy points about the first critical moment above is that a group of up to ten children were able to maintain a common endeavour for an extended period of time despite its 'disordered' elements. If play is fundamentally a way of 'organising collective behaviour' (Sutton-Smith, 1979, p.296), this raises questions about the conditions which enabled 'disordered' narratives and transformable ludic characters to be both recognisable and organising features for

³⁹ An experimental study by Fivush *et al.* (1995), for instance, suggests that whilst children at 40 months were able to tell coherent personal narratives these became increasingly coherent, complex, cohesive, and contextualised over time.

players at Westside Nursery. The following sections will offer the argument that the mobility of dispositions and characters in the death/violence play were rendered understandable to the players, at least those involved in the critical moments, in part because these are features of the contemporary everyday world.

8.2.1 Cultural resources and character transformations

That ludic activity in the critical moment was able to be maintained for an extended period by a large group of players, despite its disordered elements including discordant character transformations, was in part related to the cultural resources available to the children at Westside Nursery. Transformable characters feature significantly in both contemporary and historical cultural resources, such as fairy tales, as well as popular culture media targeted at young children. Many video games allow the player to choose a character, allowing him/her to move through the *same* virtual narrative with *different* avatars. TV shows, movies, and cartoon books are also replete with character transformations. *The X-men*, *Ben 10*, and *the Transformers* are examples which were often drawn on in death/violence play at Westside Nursery. The popularity of these transforming characters ensured their place as a symbolic resource for the play and likely also contributed to the intelligibility of mobile character uptakes amongst players.

The characters in these popular culture sources, however, are generally characterised by transformations from a stable self to transitory forms before returning to the essential self: as exemplified by Optimus Prime, a robot Transformer who is able to change into a semi-truck, or Ben 10, a young boy able to change into different aliens before returning to his human form. In contradistinction, character transformations at Westside Nursery generally did not involve a return to a stable self. As exemplified in the critical moments involving Paul and Ian above, characters were often shifted and replaced. Further, unlike in the remixed characters in death/violence play at Westside Nursery, in most cultural resources, characters may be transformable but their abilities and powers are constrained: for example, in his Spiderman form, Peter Parker's abilities are not limitless but are restricted to the characteristics Spiderman is seen to embody. Whilst the prevalence of transformable characters in culture resources may have opened up the possibilities of flexible characters for players at Westside Nursery, they cannot therefore – on their own – account for the fundamental replaceability and contingent remixing of characters in the critical moments above and death/violence play more generally at Westside Nursery.

Cultural resources, however, did offer a means for sustaining 'disordered' play. Transforming into a character and proclaiming this embodiment to the other players, even in the simple declaratives used in the critical moments above, performed a type of shorthand indicating what other players could expect, although as I will go on to discuss these expectations were of a very limited form. Announcing '*I am Sonic Hedgehog*', for instance, carried meanings beyond this simple declaration of character choice. It seemed to indicate to others the type of play narratives and interactions they could potentially expect – including whether another child was a friend or foe, as well as a sense of how the character might move or act. Here, reference to a character carried certain meanings, which exceeded the brief linguistic statement, in part by drawing on widely recognisable characters dominant in popular media as well as other cultural resources such as children's story books.

8.2.2 Peer culture and the use of character declarations

Despite the widespread prevalence of popular media, however, the children's diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds at Westside Nursery and the differences in approaches to child rearing exemplified by families in the setting meant that children had differential access to popular culture icons. Ian, for example, did not watch TV in the home whilst Peter was allowed a restricted set of DVDs and was not allowed to play with weapons, and Paul had access to a wide variety of TV programmes and video games with no restrictions on play. Further, popular culture icons were available as a subject of knowledge in highly gendered ways (Marsh, 2000). As a result, the child-players may or may not have had knowledge of media representations of particular characters, including those which they embodied.

Due to children's differential knowledge of cultural resources drawn upon in play, the meanings carried by the declaration of character choice were also those which developed in the course of play within the children's peer cultures at Westside Nursery. The constant iterations of 'Spiderman' or 'Supergirl' produced a set of meanings and embodiments associated with the character in Westside Nursery which exceeded their wider cultural figurations. The 'Fire' characters are an example of the way that cultural resources were assigned particular meanings in the setting. Fire Man, as played by Ian in the second critical moment above, likely references the Mega Man video game franchise. It is unlikely, however, that Ian himself had encountered this character given that his family did not allow mass media in his home. His use of the 'Fire Man' character potentially cited previous enactments of the character in Westside Nursery where 'Fire Man' had assumed a status, similar to his video game persona, as evil or

monstrous. 'Firegirl', by way of contrast, was a ludic character who was enacted as a way to call up a powerful female superhero⁴⁰: potentially Kaltrina, Kenza, and Aamaal who often played Firegirl, or someone else in the setting, knew the character from the online video game where Firegirl is a clever protagonist. Unlike the rather undeveloped character in the video game, however, Firegirl was elaborated as a character at Westside Nursery. 'Do you know?' Kenza asked me one day after declaring herself as Firegirl, 'I have fire in my hands. It's for the monster. I have fire eyes and fire everything' (5th March 2012). At another time, Kaltrina squinted her eyes at imagined enemies commenting similarly, 'My eyes can burn fire' (6th February 2012) and indeed this ability was embellished in future death/violence play.

These characters, however, never achieved more than a moderately stable meaning within the peer culture: characters were remixed and fluid rather than entirely stable reference points of meaning. On one occasion, for example, Rafi was quick to use 'Firegirl' as a derogatory term issued in what appeared as an attempt to position Cecilia less powerfully in the play interaction: 'Look! Naughty Firegirl!' (2nd November 2011). On other occasions, both boys and girls used fire as a superpower in a similar manner to Firegirl above yet did not associate these with a 'Fire' character. Such flexibility of characters, including their dispositions and abilities, was both accepted and recognisable in the peer culture: there was rarely, if ever, insistence on adhering to the attributes of those characters re-contextualised from popular culture or indeed on maintaining a singular character throughout a play episode.

As a result, the act of proclaiming a character— 'I'm Sonic Hedgehog' or indeed any character — became crucial; in other words, the declarative act itself carried particular meanings. Regardless of the character claimed, the act of identifying with a character seemed to be understood by children in the setting as an indication that the proclaiming child was interested in initiating, joining, or continued participation in the on-going stream of play. Paul's declaration of character, differently identified over the course of the first critical moment, seemed to serve exactly this purpose as he was almost seamlessly reintegrated into the play narrative in response to his enactment and proclamation of different characters. Responses to Kaltrina's implicit opening invitation: 'There's a bear in the woods!' in the first critical moment above are another example. In that case, the children who declared characters did not evidentially enact them in any other way: the declaration of character simply served as an acceptance of Kaltrina's invitation. Such a loose enactment of character was not always the case, however: for

⁴⁰ As discussed in Chapter 6, the use of the suffix 'girl' served to linguistically position the ludic character in less powerful role.

example, Ice Man-lan in the second critical moment was a deeply embodied character afforded particular abilities and weaknesses in keeping with his name.

Over the course of the study, it was not unusual to see a play moment begin in a similar way: a small group of children would gather and proclaim their characters, sometimes accompanied by a description of the abilities, dispositions, and resources of the declared character. As characters shifted or were replaced in the narrative, this was accompanied by new declaratives, as in both critical moments above. Other children would also approach throughout the play, often making their own character declaration. It is important to note, however, that character proclamations as efforts to initiate or enter on-going play episodes were not always successful, as Chapter 6 points out in relation to the way inscribed social categories were used in efforts to deny particular character uptakes, but they were often used as a strategy. Attempts to enter groups, including through character proclamations, may have increased with my presence; some children may have viewed my adult status as offering the assurance that they would not be rebuffed in their attempts to enter fragile play spaces.

8.2.3 The political-economy and transforming characters

Thus far, I have suggested that the common practice in Westside Nursery of making a simple declaration of character carried moderately stable meanings which drew upon: the character's representation in popular or other forms of culture, the presence a character had achieved in the peer culture(s) in the setting, and most notably the meanings assigned to the declarative act itself. Given the rapid narratives, fleeting interactions, and transformable characters – as in the bear-monster moment above – these common reference points served to make the continuation of the same play narrative possible despite its fragmentation and fluidity. What appeared as 'chaotic' play to me was at least partially organised and maintained by these declarative reference points; they achieved some level of intelligibility and commonality for the play, without making recourse to extensive linguistic elaborations.

I have also suggested that the prevalence of transforming characters in cultural resources offers a partial account for the way the fluidity of characters seemed to be an organising narrative in much of the children's death/violence play. Given the tendency for transforming characters in various cultural forms to involve movement from a stable self to a variety of other immutable although transitory forms, however, cultural resources on their own do not account for the recognisability of ludic figures characterised by extreme mutability and even fundamental replaceability within a

singular play narrative. It is here that I want to suggest the usefulness of considering the political-economy of new capitalism, where flexibilisation and uncertainty are rapidly becoming norms in people's lives (Sennett, 1998), as a helpful additional resource – albeit not the only or even necessarily most important – for understanding the way fluid characters were available and indeed rendered recognisable for child players.

Before discussing this assertion in more depth, however, some ground clearing may be necessary for on first glance children's death/violence play in an early childhood setting could not seem more removed from the political-economy. Indeed, suggesting otherwise here makes for a contentious argument. On a general level, charges of economic reductionism have led to a diminishment of systemic analyses of the political-economy (Mohanty, 2013) and particularly in relation to the study of childhood (Hart, 2008). Whilst the analysis offered here is in no way seeking to overlay a simplistic base-superstructure model on children's play or to deny the complex and contradictory interactions of the political-economy and children's lives, including their imaginative activity, the point which will be developed here is that neither should these interactions be denied. To do so is little more than cultural reductionism which can serve to naturalise the contingent operations of capitalism.

The contentiousness of considering children's ludic activity in relation to the political-economy is further compounded by figurations of childhood in opposition to, and even as protected from, the 'adult world' including the productive economy (Qvortrup, 1995). Whilst there is a generalised reluctance to consider young children's activities in the 'First World/North' beyond very direct and proximal relations – such as to family, early childhood institutions, and at most popular culture media and consumption⁴¹ – children's lives are not separate from broader patterns of production and provisioning. Children at Westside Nursery, for example, were generally aware of their parents' activities outside of the setting and would often talk about their work, study, or other activities throughout the course of the day. As Gerome responded to my somewhat belittling explanation that I would tell people at the 'big school' I go to about my observations at Westside Nursery: '*You go to my dad's university?*' (Fieldnote, 23rd January 2013). Further, children themselves are involved in a myriad of productive roles including but not limited to wage labour (Nieuwenhuys, 2005), such as 'people work' (Mayall, 2002), including in the 'First World/North'.

⁴¹ Children's consumption practices have been the increasing focus of inquiry (e.g. Buckingham, 2011; Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007). Indeed, Viruru (2008, p.231) argues: 'Normal development as a child is increasingly being rewritten as normal development as a consumer.'

Similarly, as discussed in earlier chapters, dominant 'romanticised' (Ailwood, 2003) views of play conflate it with childhood innocence (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010), a time where a child should be able to just 'be a child', apparently free from what is considered to be the pressures and corrupting influences of adult society, including the seemingly separate world of adult work (Viruru, 2008). The perceived distance between play and the political-economy is likely compounded by the characteristics of the death/violence play narratives which often take a more fantastical rather than socio-dramatic form, which might more intuitively be related to activities of social re/production, a point I return to in section 8.3.2.

Cross-cultural studies, however, have consistently noted differences in children's play which is linked not only to the immediate spaces of ludic activity but to the more general organisation of production and consumption in a given social milieu (e.g. see Göncü and Gaskins, 2006). In re-evaluating data from a comparison of children's play in six countries in the 1950s to 1970s, for instance, Edwards (2005) points out that cross-cultural differences are in large part based on the way that daily provisioning activities are organised. The group of child subjects from Taira, Okinawa, were not expected to engage in 'work'; they engaged in the most 'role-play', play categorised as imitating the activity of adults in their environment. Children in Nyansongo, Kenya, on the other hand, engaged in the least amount of 'role-play'. This was, Edwards (2005, p.19) suggests, 'probably because children there participated earliest and most heavily in real adult work and therefore did not need to practice through acting out'.

Katz's (2004) ethnography of Howa, Sudan, offers a clear example of the linkages between the political-economy and children's ludic activity. In tracing the changes to the village between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, a time in which the village underwent extreme transformations from a subsistence economy to integration in a 'cash nexus', wage labour, and global economic trade, Katz (2004, p.107) notes changes in children's imaginative play arguing:

...the heightened importance of money that characterised Howa during the arc of these children's childhoods seemed most sharply reflected in their games of "store". Here their play suggested a riot of consumption that certainly outstripped that which was then in place in the village... call[ing] forth... an almost frenzied ascendance of capitalist exchange in their community.

During the 15-year-period of intense economic restructuring, Katz (2004) notes the way children's constructions of miniature vehicles, increasingly used for commodity transportation or as ways to access the world of wage labour, became more complex and elaborate in their play.

Importantly for this chapter, what such research indicates is that play narratives and forms are not natural or universal interests of childhood but are very directly linked to the political-economy. In taking up these points, the sections which follow will suggest that the flexibility and uncertainty which characterise new capitalism contributes to the availability of such themes and modes of being in death/violence play as well as lending them recognisability, ultimately helping to sustain the 'disordered' play.

8.2.3.1 Valorisation of mobility and the novel in new capitalism

It is next to impossible to open a text about the contemporary which does not reference uncertainty and flexibility. These features are intimately linked to post-Fordist transformations of the political-economy, particularly intense since the 1970s, and are characterised by a 'time-space compression' where production, exchange, and consumption have quickened and are insistently rapid, global, and mobile (Harvey, 1990, p.284).⁴² In relation to work, flexibility refers to changes in the organisation of labour, away from stable or permanent employment⁴³; relaxation of labour law; movement of production to maximise profits; and, a mobile international division of labour. The rapid and fluid operations of new capitalism, Sennett (1998, pp.26-27) argues, are characterised by a short-termism and mobility: 'The conditions of the new economy feed ... on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job.'

In many cases, these mobile and uncertain conditions were familiar to families at Westside Nursery who had experienced migration, de-skilling/re-skilling in part because of the difficulty in having foreign credentials and experience recognised, and flexibilisation of work patterns such as shift or temporary work. As noted above, children were broadly aware of their parents' experiences outside of the setting and indeed their own experiences were mediated by indirect interactions with the state and labour market. Regardless of whether flexibility and mobility were individual children's direct familial experiences or whether these transitory conditions were even experienced by children at Westside Nursery as uncertain, however, in many ways the

⁴² Neilson and Rossiter (2005) also look to historical continuities arguing that flexibility and uncertainty are characteristics of capitalism more generally. Further, capital has always had a global character – a version of 'space compression' – dating back to early colonialism.

⁴³ Flexibility has become a 'norm' in the organisation of labour rather than a distinguishing feature of a secondary labour market (Kalleberg, 2009). In 2011, 27% of those actively working in the UK were in part-time employment (Office for National Statistics, 2011). In Britain, 22% of workplaces had some employees on temporary or fixed-term contracts in 2004 and 25% in 2011 (van Wanrooy *et al.*, 2013). 10% had some agency workers in 2011. Between 2004 and 2011 the use of 'zero hour contracts' doubled from 4% to 8%.

point here is that such fluidity is the norm now, rather than the exception, 'woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism' (Sennett, 1998, p.31).

In this context, then, the fluid and 'dis-ordered' bear-monster moment – characterised by oscillations rather than regularity in movement, narrative, and characterisation – is consistent with the organisation of life in new capitalism. This is not to say that the players were merely mimicking the flexible organisation of the workforce, or any similarly reductive claim, but to note this everyday world context may render recognisable such transitory and staccato flows of play including players' movement in fits and starts; coming together, breaking up, and coming together in new formations; and, the disjointed nature of the narratives such as weaving together bits of an off-read story book about a bear hunt, video games, and media programmes. Such 'disordered' mobility is not out of place in the contemporary. As a result, I am suggesting daily experiences in new capitalism can in part help to account for the way that fragmentation and mobility served as a way to 'make sense' of and organise some play worlds in Westside Nursery, an argument embedded within the materialist feminist analytic framework of this thesis which suggests that the political-economy is deeply implicated in people's everyday experiences as well as affirmed, re-contextualised, and shifted in their micro-practices (see section 2.6).

Indeed, constant change, argues Sennett (1998, p.87), is a significant feature of new capitalism for both businesses and individuals: 'Failure to move is taken as a sign of failure, stability seeming almost a living death.' Even though constant change may be damaging, change itself is rewarded on the stock market and by consumers at least in the short term. The preoccupation with change was not unfamiliar in the context of Westside Nursery: educators' concerns about children '*getting stuck*' in repetitive death/violence play and their sense of responsibility to intervene and '*move children on*' indicates a similar interest in continual change and innovation. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, this emphasis on change meant that educators were often more encouraging of – or at least less likely to critique, distract, or disrupt – death/violence play which appeared to include novel developments. In combination with developmental imperatives enshrined in the EYFS, however, change for change's sake was not valorised in the same way as Sennett (1998) suggests in relation to the political-economy: desired change was linked to early learning goals and concerns about children's development more broadly.

The normalisation of mobility and the demand for constant change has significant impacts on the way personhood is understood and experienced. This has potential implications for the use and recognition of shifting and remixed characters in children's

death/violence play, which will be discussed in section 8.3, but before so doing I will consider the flexibility dominant in new capitalism in relation to educational settings such as Westside Nursery.

8.2.3.2 Educational practices and the flexible ‘chameleon’ self

Changes to the organisation of labour under new capitalism mean that de-skilling and re-skilling have become regular features of workers’ lives as industries close or sub-contract and move, rendering previous skills and knowledge ‘useless’ (Harvey, 1990). The emphasis on adaptability is also characteristic of new forms of labour more generally as a corollary of the nature of flexible ‘substitutability’ (Garsten, 1999): in temporary work or zero hours contracting, for example, if one worker does not have the required dispositions, skills, or is in some way unable to fulfil the role, another worker is always available. Under such conditions, particular generalised dispositions – such as flexibility and adaptability – hold considerable appeal for government and employers, often over and above particular skills or competencies (Colley, 2006; Rikowski, 2001).⁴⁴ This can be seen in the UK policy mantras of ‘life-long learning’, ‘transferable skills’, and ‘we will get through this together’ (Cameron, 2010, p.5), an oft-used refrain of the Coalition government which implies that everyone must be flexible in their demands for wages, decent jobs, and social programmes in order to collectively weather the economic recession (Clarke and Newman, 2012).

The promotion of flexibility is not limited to the workforce but comparable shifts can be seen in the education sector, which therefore had direct impact on children’s lives whilst at Westside Nursery. Children, Lister (2003, p.433) points out, were iconic in New Labour’s ‘social investment’ policies where social policy is characterised by an emphasis on ‘human capital’ development as opposed to redistributive measures; however, this was a view of the child as ‘future worker-citizen more than democratic-citizen’ of the present. From this perspective, education for children is seen to have a key role to play in the future economic wealth of nations and individuals through the development of a highly skilled, competitive, and innovative future workforce (see critical discussions in Lister, 2003; Penn, 2010). Indeed, ‘human capital’ development has increasingly been the basis of cost-benefit arguments offered in support of early years programmes at the national and global scale (Penn, 2010) as well as the primary product of contemporary education (Qvortrup, 1995; Rikowski, 2000). It is here that

⁴⁴ The difficulty here lies in wanting to outline some broad points about ‘desirable’ dispositions in new capitalism without falling into a trap of technicism based on assumptions that labour power ‘requirements’ can be straightforwardly identified, articulated, and met and that this can be done in general, rather than job-specific, terms (Rikowski, 2001). For instance, capital may have contradictory demands for both flexibility and commitment, at least in the form of responsabilisation.

educational institutions, including early childhood settings, have been linked to the efforts of government and business to prepare children as flexible workers of the future (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007).

Kjorholt and Seland (2012, p.168), for instance, point to the way changing patterns of space, time, and groupings in early years settings in Norway – from stable to more mobile – are ‘embedded in [neoliberal] discourses of flexibility and individual choice’. Such educational practices ‘may appear to be exercises of freedom’ or at least driven by such motivations but, Fendler (2001, p.121) argues, ‘on closer examination, turn out to be repetitions and reiterations of the status quo’. She suggests that a constellation of contemporary educational discourses and practices are implicated in the process of producing ‘flexible souls’.

Contemporary discourses of the ‘whole child’, she argues, stake out the entire child including her/his attitudes and dispositions, over and above intellect and behaviour, as the objects of education. Here, ‘psychological attributes’ such as fears, wishes, and motivation to learn – reminiscent of the move to promote a disposition for life-long learning in the face of de/re-skilling – are central. Whilst the educators at Westside Nursery did not reference the term ‘whole child’, their practices indicate its discursive influence, for instance in efforts to support children to meet the EYFS (DCSF, 2008b, p.12) learning goal of being ‘interested, excited and motivated to learn’. Addressing children’s fears and desires was one of the reasons death/violence play was considered important: ‘*Children need an outlet to deal with the things that they have seen where they live, on the news,*’ commented Tashelle (12th July 2012). Notably, here, Tashelle and other educators viewed their role as supporting children to ‘channel’, ‘express’, and regulate such emotions in the ‘safe space’ of nursery. In pointing to ‘whole child’ discourses, Fendler’s (2001, p.123) argument is not that a desire to learn is inherently negative, but she notes the way such a discourse opens up ‘previously sacrosanct’ spaces to ‘psychological and regulatory apparatuses’. Indeed, monitoring emotional states and expressions, as well as children’s engagement levels, occupied educators’ discussions and was also noted by the Head as a central focus of OfSTED inspectors.

Fendler (2001, p.132) points to the way ‘whole child’ discourses combine with those of ‘interactive pedagogy’ where ‘the teacher teaches by adapting the material to the children’s momentary interests and imparts information at a pace that is set by the children’s questions’. Whilst the term itself does not appear in the EYFS and was not used by the educators at Westside Nursery, the attributes of an ‘interactive pedagogy’ were apparent. For instance, the EYFS practice guidance notes that educators: ‘Should

support and extend all children's development and learning by being an active listener and joining in and intervening when appropriate' (DCSF, 2008a, p.12) and the educators' adoption of a pedagogy based on extending children's interests (see Chapter 5) was also consistent with an 'interactive pedagogy'. Because the process of interactive pedagogy is unspecified, argues Fendler (2001), with educators and children responding to the others' unpredictable interjections, this demands and develops a 'response-ready' and 'response-able' 'whole child' prepared for the uncertainties of the future. Indeed, responsabilisation is a key attribute of the 'ideal' flexible subject of new capitalism (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

Central to the process of interactive pedagogy is the process of constant monitoring of the whole child. Here, a discourse of developmentality sets the limits on what can and will be considered a response where developmental psychology is 'deployed as a rationalistic, a priori truth...' (Fendler, 2001, p.125) against which curricular goals can be developed and measured. Indeed, the framing of pedagogy by many educators at Westside Nursery as a way to support children's development, often specifically linked to meeting pre-specified early learning goals in the EYFS, is an example of developmentality. Here, Fendler (2001) notes that whilst exchanges are unpredictable in interactive pedagogy, educator responses as well as desired outcomes are shaped by developmentality. In her account, then, 'flexible souls' are not free or limitless but reflect a particular form of 'normalization'. Whilst educating for 'flexible' workers of the future did not feature explicitly in the narratives of educators at Westside Nursery, Fendler's (2001) argument suggests that the discourses and practices in operation at Westside Nursery, and in the EYFS more broadly, may effectively constitute such productions. Overall, flexibility was considered a desirable general attribute: as Adriana commented in relation to Abdul in Chapter 5, his lack of flexibility and unwillingness to adapt to changing conditions and interactions was an on-going concern for the educators.

In sum, then, flexible forms of the self can be understood as available, even 'desirable', modes of being both in the broader political-economy and in contemporary educational discourses and practices, including Westside Nursery – notwithstanding the myriad of other forms of desired labour-power which may in policy be considered best inculcated through practices such as 'skill and drill', rather than interactive pedagogy. In contrast to (popular) culture media discussed previously where character transformations consist of movement between immutable selves, of note in UK policy, the labour market, and certain educational practices is that the flexibility implied is that of constant, fluid adaptation. This is aptly symbolised by the nickname 'chameleon' given

to themselves by a group of Swedish temporary workers (Garsten, 1999); in the competitive and transitory context of their work, it implies a mode of being that involves a fundamental adaptability of competencies and dispositions subject to the vagaries of the market and each specific employer. The chameleon has no 'true' colour but changes in relation to the environment as a way to deal with challenges, demands, or changes which arise in their uncertain and insecure positions.

Such fundamental remixing and replaceability is reminiscent of Paul and Ian's easy movement between characters in the critical moments which began this chapter. Both Paul and Ian met with particular 'crises' in these narratives: death in the case of Paul-Sonic Hedgehog and extinguishing of his life-force in the case of Fire Man-Ian. Many responses were possible in these moments of crises: Paul-Sonic Hedgehog could have, for example, been resuscitated through the children's efforts, remained dead, left the play, or acted otherwise. Fire Man-Ian could have, for instance, developed an ingenious strategy to prevent the water from extinguishing his fire or tried to form an alliance with Azar. To be clear, the point is not to elaborate what would have made the narrative more coherent or collaborative or to offer some other sort of evaluation of the effectiveness of either child's action; instead, I am pointing to the availability of mobile selves as a way to address conditions of crisis or uncertainty in the play narrative. In Ian's case, transforming into ice-Ian meant that survival was assured as Azar's actions (the water hose) were rendered unimportant through a change in his personal characteristics (from fire to ice). For Paul, the changes in character seemed to allow for a way out of conditions which otherwise seemed to imply closure and finality; in this critical moment, revival from death was not possible but a new character served as a way to continue on in the same narrative, a form of continual reinvention of the self.

While Paul or Ian were more actively involved in embodying these flexible selves than other children in the critical moments above, transformable characters were commonly used by others in the death/violence play at Westside Nursery. Perhaps just as importantly, however, Paul and Ian's character transformations needed to be intelligible to the others who played with them in order for the joint ludic activity to continue. Whilst to a certain extent all play can be characterised as uncertain, given its contestive attributes (see Chapter 2), the centrality of character transformation in these narratives made these play scenes even less predictable. With the possibility of meeting a newly embodied character at every moment, players had a limited basis to predict potential actions or responses of the child-players they encountered in these critical moments. In this sense, I am suggesting that a familiarity with flexibility as a mode of being was just as important for the other players as it was for Paul and Ian, even if they were

embodying more stable characters themselves, and it can help to explain how such transformations were recognisable to other players. Indeed, when Paul re-joined the search for the monster-bear, the others easily accepted his new character pronouncements rather than demanding fidelity to the initial character. When Ian changed characters, Azar seemed to effortlessly accept this change and adjusted her own responses to meet with the new dispositions and characteristics of Ian's transformation.

The preceding discussion has focused on the way that flexibility can be understood as an available mode of being both in the broader political-economy and in contemporary educational discourses and practices, including at Westside Nursery. In combination with culture resources which are replete with transforming characters and the continual re-iteration of character substitutability in death/violence play at Westside Nursery, this can help to account for the easy acceptance of shifting and replaceable characters within the peer culture(s) at Westside Nursery and the possibility of sustaining the discordant and unpredictable play such character transformations produced. The chapter now moves to consider the implications of the mobilisation of flexible selves in play for the everyday world.

8.3 Implications of ludic replaceability for the everyday world

The repeated use of transformable characters and iterations of fragmented and mobile narratives both drew on sources from the everyday world and had implications beyond play worlds. Given the porosity – indeed simultaneity – of ludic and everyday worlds which has been advanced thus far in this thesis, ways of being which are actualised and 'make sense' in play become possible in the everyday world. In this sense, the transformable characters taken up and recognised by others may serve to render 'flexibility' a manageable, acceptable, and even normalised mode of being for players beyond play. The suggestion here, in keeping with the discussion in Chapter 7, is that child players may have (dis)identified with affects, dispositions, and ideologies – rather than the literal character themselves. Here, then, player (dis)identifications can be understood in relation to the disposition of mutability itself.

The use of tentative language here is intentional: I am neither claiming a determinate, causal relationship between mobility of characters in play and flexibility in the political-economy and transformable characters in cultural resources, nor am I arguing that such ludic dispositions will necessarily traverse to the everyday world. What I am pointing to is that the prevalence of replaceable selves in play suggests a potentiality for flexibility to begin to be experienced synonymously with personhood. It is here that I

want to suggest that, in the context of the organisation of labour in new capitalism, children's ludic activity – and here I am specifically looking at that play which involves the production of flexible selves – can be viewed as a way that children are involved in producing their own labour-power potential.

Labour-power, 'this strange, living commodity' (Rikowski, 2002a, p.2), is 'the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description' (Marx, 1977 [1867], p.164). Labour-power, Rikowski (2000) points out, has a virtual existence – embodied as a potential in each person – and a real social existence which is activated when labour-power is used in the labour process to add value. Labour-power capabilities include not only skills and knowledge but also modes of being including those which are required for specific types of labour. These capabilities also have a more generalised form which Rikowski (2000) refers to as labour-power willingness: those dispositions, beliefs, and desires needed for workers to exercise their labour-power, which in the contemporary moment at national and global scales, takes place in a highly stratified division of labour where, as I have pointed out above, flexibility and adaptability are highly valued aspects of labour-power.

The process of labour-power production can be 'diachronic', argues Qvortrup (1985; 1995)⁴⁵: children's work – in the form of the time, energy, creativity, and intelligence put into school work to produce labour-power – is 'necessary for society, but not immediately marketable' (Qvortrup, 1995, p.67).⁴⁶ Whilst both Qvortrup (1995) and Rikowski (2000) argue that labour-power is increasingly the primary product of contemporary education – in the form of 'human capital' geared towards competition between nations – there is a notable absence in their work considering the education and ludic activity of children in non-compulsory, preschool education. This absence may be explained by pervasive views of very young children as 'incompetent' and non-productive; the substantially diachronic period between preschool and potential labour-power activation in the market place for most people in the UK; or, the separation that

⁴⁵ Qvortrup's (1985; 1995) argument runs as follows. Whilst children in industrialised economies do not, in the main, work in the market economy, both teachers and children are involved in the production of labour-power in educational institutions. This shift in the form of work children are involved in is concomitant with the changing organisation of the economy: industrialised economies have a need for workers with numeracy, literacy, and digital knowledge, for instance, which – given their cumulative and abstract nature – are less likely to be learned on the job.

⁴⁶ This point is helpful in that it does not just collapse the child into 'becoming' or 'futura' as children are viewed as actively producing in the present. However, Qvortrup's (1985; 1995) argument that there may be a time gap between the production of labour-power and the selling of labour-power for wages misses other important aspects of the division of labour. Feminist arguments that labour-power is re/produced through care activities which take place outside of the operations of the market also point to the limits of marketability as extensive of the division of labour even in capitalist economies. In this regard, Mayall's (2002) research into children's contributions to care work in the family, for instance, are significant.

is often invoked between the worlds of play and the everyday world, particularly work. Regardless, their logic opens up a space for considering young children's participation in the production of labour-power, specifically flexibility in this discussion, including through their ludic activity. I should note here that I am not making the a-historical claim that flexibility is a labour-power disposition which will necessarily be desirable where, when, and if these children sell their labour-power. Given that flexibility is a generally desirable mode of being for government and employers at a global scale in new capitalism, however, it can be seen to both constitute flexibility as a recognisable mode of being in the contemporary moment and inform the production of what is presently a desirable labour-power potential.

As I have suggested in the preceding discussion, remixed and replaceable selves were rendered intelligible in death/violence play, suggesting that these modes of being were also made plausible beyond the play world (see Chapter 7). With the continual iterations of transformable characters in death/violence play at Westside Nursery, players were able to experiment with the condition of substitutability: the flexible reinvention of personhood came to 'make sense' in the peer culture as a response to 'crises' encountered in uncertain narratives. Given play's porous boundaries, this has implications for the everyday world. Four key points, which I shall go on to elaborate, follow from this argument: the production of labour-power can be viewed as a collective endeavour; play never involves a straight forward mimicry and production of labour-power; viewing play as a site of labour-power production can help to redress the misrecognition of children's activity; and, the contradictory nature of flexibility complicates any straightforward attempt to consider the implications of these practices.

8.3.1 Labour-power production as a social endeavour

Following the argument that ludic activity is potentially productive of particular forms of labour-power, the first point of elucidation is acknowledgement that this is a social process. As is likely evident from the arguments advanced thus far, flexibility in ludic activity did not emerge from individual children as an originary source. Instead, much as the Bakhtinian circle emphasises that the word is always half someone else, citations of transformable characters can be seen to be populated with socially produced cultural resources and material conditions in the everyday world. In this sense, characters and narratives in play have a thoroughly social nature.

What's more, this chapter has pointed to the importance of considering the way that transformable characters were responded to by others, noting that in the critical

moments above – as well as in other moments at Westside Nursery – they were easily accepted into the flow of ludic activity. Here I am suggesting that this easy reception of flexible characters was central not only to the continuing narrative, but to the production of flexibility itself. If Ian and Paul’s transformable and remixed characters had not been so readily accepted by other players in the critical moment above, it is plausible that they would have moved on to other strategies to address the ‘crises’ provoked by the play narratives rather than continuing to use character transformations in the critical moments and beyond. More broadly, as children in the peer culture used remixed and transformable characters and these were accepted and incorporated into the ludic activity, this secured the potentiality of flexibility and made it an increasingly used and familiar condition amongst players in the setting. Indeed, this was a self-reinforcing and collective process of producing flexibility.

8.3.2 Play as a contestive engagement with labour-power production

In arguing that children reproduce labour-power potential in play in the form of flexible dispositions, this is not to suggest there was a simple mimicry of conditions of labour market flexibility in death/violence play, not the least because such play often took fantastical forms. The narratives in the two critical moments above were not obviously connected to the everyday world of provisioning and survival, as much as they might be in ‘socio-dramatic’ play such as often happens in the ‘home corner’; although, as I have argued, neither were they entirely disconnected from inequality and personhood in the everyday world. Further, because of the contestive characteristics of play (see Chapter 2), the remixing and replacing of selves was something which was ‘played’ with, made both familiar and strange in the ludic activity.

In developing this line of argument, the chapter has predominantly focused on the way that flexibility was made familiar as a mode of being. Flexibility, however, was ‘made strange’ in part through the differential embodiments ranging from remixing abilities and dispositions of different characters, movement between stable character poles such as happened when playing Ben-10, and constant fluid movement. Developing different ways to explain character replaceability and embody flexibility added to the contestive and transformative interjections children made into flexible being, contesting any sense in which this was a form of passive mimicry. Finally, the responses of other players to character fluidity were both unpredictable and contestive. Albeit that I have emphasised the easy acceptance of remixed and replaceable characters in the death/violence play, such acceptance was never certain nor did it always take the same form. When Paul re-joined the bear-monster hunt as a new character, the other players occasionally

made demands of him based on expectations related to his new character; at other times he just became part of the flow of movement spreading around the outdoor space. When Ian changed characters, Azar at first responded antagonistically, attempting to extinguish his life force, and then she remixed her own character through a citation of Ian's Fire-person:

After extinguishing Fire Man-Ian, Azar – who had, until that point, been a fairy with a magic wand which could remove her from any dangerous situation – called to Sabir: 'If you put water on me, you'll never see me!' When Sabir did not respond, Azar demanded: 'Do it!' As Sabir sprayed 'water' on her, he shouted: 'Now you'll never see her! I shrank her.' In response, Azar shrunk down into a tiny ball on the ground.

(Fieldnote, 18th June 2012)

Not only were Azar's responses to Ian's character transformations unpredictable, but this fieldnote reiterates the point made in the previous section about the social nature of the production of flexibility. In this case, Sabir's responses to Azar's character remixing were partially constitutive of her transformation. Essentially then, I am suggesting that playing with character transformations was a way that children engaged contestively with mobile and transforming characters.

8.3.3 Resituating children's social contributions

The argument put forward thus far follows Qvortrup (1995) in suggesting children can be seen to be involved in the division of labour making diachronic contributions to the political-economy through involvement in labour-power production. This claim has been extended to include children's ludic activity and the production of flexibility; it has also been clarified that this process is a collective endeavour undertaken within peer cultures in dialogue with the material and cultural conditions of the players' lives. 'Placing children in the division of labour' in this way, Qvortrup (1985) argues, has important consequences for the status of childhood. While children may be an economic burden on individual families in the contemporary, he asserts that to say that children are 'economically worthless' (Zelizer, 1994) obfuscates children's contributions through labour-power production reifying children by obscuring the work which goes into producing their labour-power. Further, this serves to minimise children's contribution to 'society and social change' (Close, 2009, p.191).

This misrecognition can, in part then, account for the subordination and inequality of children as a social group, leading Qvortrup (1995) to argue that resituating children's contributions can challenge children's political and material marginalisation. This final

claim, however, effectively roots claims to equity in participation in the production of value as opposed to assertions of moral equality, with potentially disastrous impacts for any individual or group who is not able or is not viewed as able to make such contributions, for instance a new-born infant. Notwithstanding these concerns, redressing the misrecognition of children's contributions certainly makes substantial strides in explaining enduring generational inequalities – much as feminists have pointed out in relation to women's unacknowledged caring work in the home – and offers a more complex sense of the social reproduction of capital which includes children's ludic activity.

8.3.4 The contradictory status of flexibility: intensification of exploitation and radical possibilities

The politically saturated and contradictory nature of flexibility complicates any simple efforts to redress the status of childhood through recognition of children's contributions, including the potential production of flexibility in death/violence play. Flexibility is not in and of itself a negative condition, as I will expand on below, but this is a mode of being demanded by and benefitting capital in the current political-economy. This section takes its inspiration from arguments raised by Hennessy (2000) and Stabile (1997) that new forms of 'postmodern identities', such as more fluid sexualities, may challenge norms whilst still remaining within the logic of new capitalism as they are 'quite compatible with the mobility, adaptability, and ambivalence required of service workers today and with the new more fluid forms of the commodity' (Hennessy, 2000, p.109).

As such, this final section of the chapter seeks to make an incision in arguments which, in the main, uncritically promote mobile and fluid selves as essential for developing a political-ethical orientation to the world. Edmiston's (2008) research will operate as an exemplar of this type of argument in relation to ludic activity. Although it is not entirely clear whether he is discussing character transformability within singular play narratives, extrapolating from his discussion of his son's uptake of different characters provides a general sense of the value he attributes to shifting characters. He suggests playing different characters provides players with a way to challenge their assumptions by taking on the perspectives of others. Character changeability also allows for consideration of ethical questions through evaluation of the impact of the same action from the perspectives of multiple others. Here, character replaceability and remixing is postulated as essential, or at very least central, to the process of developing ethical identities. Whilst this thesis does not dispute the potentials offered by taking multiple perspectives through mobile character embodiments, it has been argued that such

transformations cannot be held to straightforwardly result in ethical orientations in the everyday (see Chapter 7). Regardless of the fundamentally different contexts of research, the point here, in continuing to engage in critical dialogue with Edmiston's (2008) work, is to indicate the problem of valorising character transformations, regardless of the presence or not of an adult. Fluid and playful exploration of 'possible selves' and multiple perspectives is insufficient on its own for a political-ethical practice. Emphasising the centrality of mobile character embodiments in the formation of 'ethical identities' obscures the political-economic conditions which make flexible modes of being possible, plausible, and 'desirable' and the inequities imbedded in contemporary articulations of flexibility.

In considering the contradictory status of flexibility, it is important to note that flexibility is 'double-edged': it was both a demand of workers in opposition to subordinating and exploitative conditions as well as the 'oppressive face of post-Fordist capitalism' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, no pagination). Indeed, Harvey (2007) argues that seemingly shared desires for flexibility led to the relatively rapid and consensual uptake of neoliberal values, including the flexibilisation of labour, in the struggle for hegemony. He is at pains, however, to point out that it is not flexibility for workers that is the central feature of this re-organisation of the political-economy. In other words, flexibility is not equally beneficial but has resulted in a 'highly exploitative system of flexible accumulation (all the benefits accruing from increasing flexibility in labour allocations in both space and time go to capital)' (Harvey, 2007, p.53). The term 'precarity', along with the noun 'precariat' which is a combination of precarious and proletariat, has been coined in these changing circumstances and has been taken up in both academic and activist circles to connote the unequal distribution of uncertainty and instability in the new organisation of labour as well as other aspects of 'intersubjective life' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, no pagination).⁴⁷

Interrogating the affective and social implications of flexibilisation, Sennett (1998) argues that the flexible organisation of work in new capitalism has led to an erosion of trust, commitment, and orientation to the other as these require time and a sense of on-going, rather than momentary and transient, interactions in order to be established and maintained. He asks: 'How can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society? How can durable social relations be sustained? How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragment?'

⁴⁷ There are risks to using the term, however, not least because it occludes vast differences in the experiences of different groups of 'precariat', such as undocumented migrant workers and 'creative' workers.

(Sennett, 1998, p.26). Whilst Sennett's argument tends towards a romanticisation of human relations and ethics prior to new capitalism and potentially overestimates the necessity of narrative as an organising form of ethical personhood (e.g. see Strawson, 2008)⁴⁸, his work raises important questions about some of the challenges of political-ethical being in new capitalism.

Taken together, these points suggest that making flexibility intelligible, and a potential disposition to identify with, through the remixing and replaceability of characters in response to uncertain narratives is not only compatible with the organisation of new capitalism but has implications for inequitable sociospatial relations. Although flexibility has intensified exploitation in the contemporary political-economy, it cannot be understood as an inherent condition of inequality and marginalisation. Flexibility can even be understood to be indispensable for social justice efforts in a political field that shifts and changes given capital's propensity for dynamic restructuring and domestication of social movements and in terms of building a justice-oriented politics, not based on assumptions of inevitability but for a necessarily open future. Here, there is a potential opening for the radical possibilities of ludic activity where 'flexibility' and comfort with uncertainty do not simply become modes of being which make people 'better' human capital and are not valorised as the end goal of a critical politic, but which none-the-less become a 'basis for innovation from which new forms of organisation and life may become instituted' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, no pagination). The final chapter of this thesis will take up these ideas, considering the way play can both re-inscribe and unsettle inequalities in its contestive engagement with the world and the concomitant possibilities play offers for educational projects concerned with social transformation and equality.

⁴⁸ Strawson (2008) argues that narrativity is neither necessary for psychological or ethical being. He emphasises that learning and development can happen through embodied, everyday acts which are not storied or even reflected upon; and, ethical responsibility to another is not reliant on narrativised memories of past interactions but acts in the present.

CHAPTER 9:

Conclusion: The radical potentials of death/violence play

This thesis began with a story from my own practice as an early childhood educator, the moment when ‘gun met butterflies’, which in many ways served as the catalyst for the present study. The concern, debates, and indeed antagonisms which were provoked by this incident centred around the ‘appropriateness’ of guns – as well as violence and death more broadly – in imaginary narratives, both verbalised and enacted, in educational settings and other sites where young children live their lives. In taking this up as a topic for the present study, I have come to realise that in many ways I was motivated by a desire to once and for all resolve for myself a perspective and practice in response to death/violence play, an aspiration which I have come to regard with increasing scepticism. In this desire, I shared a preoccupation common to both the academic and professional literature about death/violence play which generally orbits around the normative question of whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for children. Much research, professional literature, and contemporary policy in the UK does not advocate banning death/violence play as this is not only considered unachievable but is attributed with pushing the play further into hidden corners: with this point I certainly concur. As a general tendency, however, discussion remains entangled with appraising and evaluating death/violence play, and even searching for regularity in casual relations between death/violence play and children’s (future) development, all within a binary framework where the play either functions as the source of or the solution to wider ‘social problems’.

This thesis has suggested that such attempts at predictive evaluation are doomed to failure given the non-linear nature of causality in open systems (see Chapter 2) and the complex and contextual nature of death/violence play where any simple formulations are fundamentally reductive and even misleading. Even further, this thesis indicates that to retain such a focus is detrimental, serving to obfuscate a series of other important questions about the socio-cultural and political-economic conditions of possibility for death/violence play as well as the everyday sociospatial relations which may be renewed, reworked, or even transformed in such activity. Indeed, throughout this inquiry I have been at pains to avoid reifying play as natural, freely chosen, separate from ‘reality’, and completely open in possibility. The thesis has also problematised the naturalisation of childhood as ‘becoming’ and ‘futuraity’, innocence or

danger, and clearly separable from 'adulthood'. Such reifications mask the historical and social constitution of both generational social relations and death/violence play.

This thesis has asserted that death/violence play – perhaps more than many other forms of play given its thematic occupation with power, domination, and mortality – has both an ambiguous nature and concomitantly an ambivalent status in the contemporary world of early childhood in the UK. Indeed this thesis has pointed to the self-reinforcing nature of this ambivalence. Conceptualisations of childhood, policies, and political-economic factors generate numerous conflicting perspectives about death/violence play; despite, or more accurately because of, the contradictory nature of these claims (e.g. see sections 1.1 and 7.1.1), the extent of the on-going debate in the academic and professional literature serves as a form of amplification highlighting death/violence play as a particularly contentious form of imaginary play. The continuing spotlight on death/violence play also secures it as a trope in broader debates about childhood, gender, and the role of early education such as the 'crisis' in boys achievement in education discussed in section 1.1, likewise enlarging its controversial status.

In light of these points, in considering sociospatial relations in Chapter 4 and 5, it was suggested that children's death/violence play was, after Douglas (1966; 2002), 'matter out of place' in Westside Nursery, which – somewhat paradoxically – was also viewed as (partially) recuperable for developmental aims. Whilst matter out of place can be disordering and threatening to existing categories and conceptualisations it is precisely these characteristics which offer a possibility of the new. Through the use of ethnographic description and an embodied Bakhtinian interpretive analysis of critical moments (see section 3.5.1) this thesis engaged with children's and adult educators' perspectives and practices in relation to death/violence play in order to offer a series of novel, or at least complicating, ways of understanding and therefore relating to childhood and death/violence play.

An overarching theme in this regard has been the argument that ludic and everyday worlds are experienced – corporeally, cognitively, and affectively – simultaneously. Instead of being temporally divided, a series of bounded 'play frames' which players move in and out of, players are always both in and of the everyday as well as ludic world(s) in any given moment. Contesting any sense of firm boundaries between these worlds, yet without moving to elide them, this thesis has argued for an understanding of ludic and everyday as porously bounded and traversed by affect, sociospatial relations, ideology, and embodied personhood. Importantly here, this point does not subject ludic acts to literal and linear interpretation which might suggest that playing a violent character will necessarily lead a child to be more violent in the everyday world. Instead,

the emphasis has been on a much more figurative and affective understanding of flows between the ludic and everyday: the ways of being and feeling made possible in play open up new possibilities for everyday selves. An implication of this conceptualisation has been the argument that whilst play worlds allow for some release from physical, material, and cultural constraints (as well as productivities) in the everyday world, they can never be understood to completely escape: the everyday is continually present, if somewhat opaque, even in the most fantastical of play narratives. More specifically, this thesis has explored the way normalising categories – such as the association of girlhood with niceness, weakness, or vulnerability – and indeed the inequities which they engender and are engendered by, form a constitutive limit for players' uptake of characters in death/violence play. These limits, however, are neither assured *a priori*, for instance gender was not always posed as a limitation for character uptakes, nor necessarily challenged through the course of death/violence play. By accepting that she could not be Dracula, for example, Cecilia not only accepted the gendered limitations placed on her character potentials but further reinforced them (section 6.2).

Given that in UK early childhood settings, policy, spatial conditions, and educator practices work together to create conditions where young children are generally expected to engage in playful activity at least for part of the day, consideration of ludic activity and its implications for the everyday world is of pressing concern. A matter of significant consequence is the manner in which imaginary characters became mobile resources for some children – recognised for their creativity, imagination, and ability to '*move the play on*' – whilst for others, characters taken up in play became fixed or inscribed on the player. It was argued that this happens through the mapping of everyday world inequalities and attributes of ludic characters on to normative constructions of particular marginalised children and of children as a social group. Given the prevalence of extreme themes and characterisations in death/violence play – including domination, aggression, passivity, and helplessness – such inscriptions are neither neutral nor minor. In Chapter 6, for instance, I pointed to the way that monstrous characters were arguably inscribed on to two Black boys in part on the basis of historic and contemporary inequalities and the construction of Black, working class masculinity.

In other words, this thesis has argued that play cannot be idealised as a space of endless possibility, free from the constraints of enduring inequalities. It has further suggested the importance of looking to ludic characters and the way these become inscribed on everyday personhood as part of the complex understanding of how childhood and marginalised groups of children are conceptualised and inequalities are

(re)produced. As the discussion has suggested, the inscription of ludic characters on to children's bodies based on historic and contemporary inequalities can actually serve to compound injustices, making play a key site for interrogation of early childhood practice.

Another theme of this thesis has been the importance of attending to the body in ludic activity. In part, this relates to the previous discussion about the way certain characteristics of the body – and not others – were noted, assigned meanings, and then served a constitutive limit or site of inscription. This thesis has also argued for the importance of attending to corporeal experience in death/violence play, suggesting that a key path for the flows between ludic and everyday worlds is through embodied play characters. Crucially, as players embody ludic and everyday selves synchronically, affects, dispositions, and ideologies enacted in play can become entangled with personhood beyond the play. The notion of dialogic bodies has been put forward as a way to conceptualise this movement and to understand the thoroughly social nature of embodied experience, whilst not discounting the 'more-than-social': all those biological, spatial, and technological fields in which the body is enacted and transformed. In expanding on dialogic bodies in Chapter 6 and particularly in Chapter 7, I suggested that player-characters are 'overpopulated' (Bakhtin, 1981, p.294) with 'voices' and embodied citations: player-characters are enacted in an embodied dialogue between the past including aspects of the material social order, cultural resources, previous play scenarios, and embodied positioned-practices as well as anticipatory of the future including the responses of immediate and more distant others. In Chapter 7, for instance, I considered players' embodied citations of Sleeping Beauty narratives and noted the way the insular intimacy of idealised narratives of normative heterosexuality served to erect a barrier around their engagements potentially in anticipation of encroachment into their fragile interactive space.

Continuing to build on the relationship proffered between play and everyday worlds, a further argument that has been developed in this thesis relates to the centrality of children, and even imaginative play, to social reproduction: specifically the renewal of sociospatial relations and the social production of labour-power. For instance in Chapter 7, I considered the identifications players made with characters and narratives through a process of dialogic embodiment, in the process renewing sociospatial relations linked to normative heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and propertied relations. Working together with the previous points about the body, the contention here is that because ludic activity is not only cognitive but is experienced in and enacted by the body in ways that exceed the symbolic, identifications operate at a

variety of levels, many of which are largely unconscious. Because of the embodied intensities of such ludic activity – perhaps particularly so given the physical and emotive characteristics of death/violence play – it was argued that (dis)identifications were both profound and compelling. Chapter 8 examined the prevalence of shifting and replaceable characters in response to moments of narrative crisis in death/violence play, offering both cultural resources and the increasing flexibilisation of all aspects of social life as sources which made these transformable characters both available and recognisable in the ludic activity. The chapter suggested that the presence of mobile characters in play arguably increased the recognisability of replaceable selves and was productive of identifications with dispositions of flexibility beyond the play. Given the politically saturated nature of flexibility in new capitalism, where constant innovation and change of the self are often desirable forms of exploitable labour-power, I suggested there is a need to problematise rather than valorise such flexibility.

These chapters, working alongside Qvortrup (1985; 1995) and Mayall (2002), offered an important corrective to contemporary common-sense views that children are inconsequential or have a minor role in actively renewing the social. In insisting that imaginative play cannot be viewed as separate from social reproduction and the political-economy, they add an additional layer to such assertions through a challenge to the idea that play has only ephemeral or other worldly import. This was not a move to further instrumentalise play, for instance by offering ways that it can be put to work for the purposes of normative development or capital, but towards a recognition of children's active contributions to processes of provisioning, survival, and cultural generation – including in their playful activity (see also Corsaro, 2005; Corsaro, 2009).

At the same time as pointing to the relation of death/violence play to the reproduction of inequalities, and the impossibility and undesirability of engaging in a polarised debate about its impacts and therefore requisite responses, I have come to see death/violence play, and ludic activity more broadly, as a site of radical potential. The point here is not, *pace* Edmiston (2008), to suggest that death/violence play is a particularly potent site for the formation of political-ethical identities, that it is necessarily a site where a radical politics will take root, or that it can or should replace other sites of politics; instead, the emphasis in this claim is placed on the 'potential'. As part of a broader concern with enduring inequalities, which has in part motivated my interest in this research topic, I am pointing to the possibilities of the ludic as one site, amongst many, for taking up a radical politics. In moving towards an ending of this thesis, if not a conclusion to the conceptual line of inquiry begun here, this contention will be taken up in more detail. The following sections will come at play as a site of radical potential from two

directions: conceptualising this claim in terms of children's (and adults') ludic activity as well as considering the implications for educational practices. A purposefully broad term is employed here, for although my motivation and site of study for this thesis were within the context of early childhood education, the implications move beyond such sites.

9.1 Play as a site of radical potential

As has been stressed throughout this thesis, ludic activity is a contestive and transformative interaction with the world. It, therefore, never involves a straightforward imitation of the everyday even when themes and characters have evident links to dominant sociospatial relations and cultural narratives and practices. As a transformative interjection in the world, a pulling apart and building anew as Henricks (2006) would have it, play has the potential for something much more than social reproduction. Ludic activity offers the possibility to overturn the status quo – at least within the confines of the play narrative – through playing with the taken-for-granted. As Katz (2004) points out, play surfaces the historically and socially constructed aspects of the world: the recognition that players can make different sociospatial relations, selves, and worlds in play is suggestive of the social constitution of the everyday world. What's more, argues Katz (2004, p.101), ludic 'engagements offered the possibility of refusing accepted meanings and thus, in a tactile material way, they had revolutionary potential.'

Indeed, such potentials, albeit that 'revolutionary' is perhaps overstated, have been indicated at different points in this thesis. In Chapter 6, for instance, I indicated that while bodies are inscribed with particular characteristics – based on inequalities that take particular historical forms in relation to commodity production, consumption, and exchange – which were often used as a constitutive limit for character uptakes, such limitations were contested. In Chapter 8, I indicated the ambivalence of the production of flexible selves as a possible and plausible mode of being in death/violence play: as mentioned above flexibility is a generally preferred labour-power potential for capital, but it is also a mode of being or attitude that can be productive of a necessarily innovative and dynamic approach to a radical politics. Chapters 5 and 7 considered the use of death as a generative metaphor in the play: the death trope provoked relatively stable responses – such as attention and inclusion – in the face of uncertainties and ambiguities encountered in ludic activity more generally. In particular, the use of the death trope made intimate, caring touch between children permissible and even demanded. I argued that this strained at capitalism's 'subject of value', marked by

corporeal containment, individualism, and economic calculation. Indeed, this ludic activity was suggestive of children's desire to be intimately cared for and by each other, contra generationed aspects of care in the everyday world. It also involved enactment of new ways of being, opening up the possibility that social relations in the everyday world could be otherwise. Indeed, Katz (2004, p.253) argues having 'a vision of what else could be' is central to any development of radical politics arguing that the characteristics of ludic activity offer a space to do so: play allows for re-imagining the possibilities of the world.

As this thesis has pointed out, however, and indeed as Katz (2006; 2004) makes abundantly clear, the contestive characteristics of play offer no guarantee that ludic inventions will necessarily traverse into the everyday world nor will they necessarily be 'revolutionary' in nature. In her Sudanese ethnography, as in the present study, renewal and domestication of the existing social order were common in play albeit in an always once-occurrent, not-strictly-imitative manner. Katz (2004, p.102) notes that play amongst children in Howa primarily involved 'trying on roles that readied them to be subjects of capitalism and participants in available worlds of adult work.' It was, she proposes, possibly the close interweaving of play with aspects of the everyday world of production and provisioning which led to 'habit' holding sway. This argument, however, would suggest that death/violence play – with its often fantastical narratives many steps removed from the banal moments of children's lived experiences – might be a site where ruptures with the status quo were more likely to occur. Whilst the seeds of disidentification were present in the death/violence play at Westside Nursery (see Chapter 7), they were not extensive by any means and, more importantly, I am not content to attribute their presence solely to the fantastical nature of many of the play narratives and the separation of activity considered to be play or work in a highly industrialised economy.

In what follows, then, this chapter seeks to make some headway in terms of exploring the complexity of factors which might allow for ludic activity that make space for the reimagining of existing sociospatial relations and inequalities. In this undertaking, I will take an unconventional approach in so far as I will include new data in a conclusion chapter. The point here is to consider a critical moment which involved a series of ethical-political problematics in order to make some suggestions as to what might constitute this moment as a site of progressive potential and more consequentially what practices may have opened up this moment as a radical space. The incorporation of data at this point allows for these arguments to be moved out of a level of abstract

conceptualisation where they largely remain in Katz's (2004) discussion of the 'revolutionary' potentials of play, propositions to which I am otherwise very amenable.

This critical moment took place after lunch in the outdoor area:

As Peter ran across the space to join Gerome who was spinning quickly around the big tree, a group of children left their various activities to follow. I was standing nearby and also began moving forward when Peter waved me over. Cecilia was the first to approach, but Peter pushed her and yelled: 'No! This is just for boys!' Cecilia pushed back, and the tension escalated as it appeared that a full-blown fight was about to take place.

Standing next to me and looking on, Kaltrina shouted: 'The monster! Come over!' The fight between Peter and Cecilia stopped as quickly as it had begun and they ran with the rest of us to hide from the monster. Cecilia breathed heavily and Sabir wiped his brow as Kenza whispered: 'We have to trap the monster in there.' She pointed to a set of fenced-in stairs leading to the basement of the setting.

Peter exclaimed: 'No! He's the hulk. He'll just jump out. We have to get him with our guns.' A cacophony of voices responded, shouting conflicting explanations and strategies. Not able to hear anything, I took up my first 'active' role in the narrative: 'We definitely need a plan,' I whispered in a 'fearful' voice, 'Let's hear everyone's ideas and then decide.'

'Let's cut his head off with the sword,' responded Sabir.

Kaltrina suggested: 'Let's put ropes across the top so he can't get out.'

'We need more children to help us,' Kenza pronounced. 'The monster is so big. He is eating all the fish. We have to save them.' Seeming to concur, the group set off in search of assistance.

They stopped by the garden area and gathered in a close group where Osman was digging. He agreed to help, picking up a handful of soil and explaining: 'I've got my dirt to get the monster.'

The players carried on their search for support, assembling a group of nine children in total. At that point, Kaltrina stopped and insisted: 'OK. We need many plans,' moving her hands up and down as if to show the magnitude of tactics necessary to stop the monster.

After a moment of strategising, Kenza grabbed a 'baby monster' in her hands. Seeing the action, Peter reached into his pocket for more monsters, urging the players: 'Throw them in there!' We all grabbed similar air-monsters in our hands, threw them into the fenced-in area, and ran off.

(Fieldnote, 20th February 2012)

In this critical moment, the players – including myself – were faced with a series of ethical and political questions both internal to the play narrative and part of the everyday sociospatial relations in the setting. Peter's initial refusal to allow girls into the active play, for instance, reinforced gender binaries using ascribed characteristics as a

basis for exclusion, raising questions about possible ways to disrupt and challenge sexist practices. This led to actions which worked against such hegemonic ideas. Internal to the play narrative was the confrontation with the enormous, growing, and insatiable monster. On one level, this can be viewed as an encounter with a creature who not only existentially threatened the fish population but the players themselves. The narrative also raised questions about what sort of action is possible, ethical, and necessary in the face of such horror, as the group considered whether death or imprisonment would offer effective and satisfactory responses and the relative benefits of individual and collective action. The story of the insatiable monster in the critical moment, devouring all of the fish for its own individual benefit, also has resonances with more overtly political questions about private consumption and accumulation. Indeed, the monstrous has often been used as a cultural trope to signify – amongst other political fears – hyper-consumption, unbridled expansionism, and the destruction of non-renewable resources often associated with capitalism (Lee, 2013; McNally, 2011).

It is for these reasons that I am arguing that the critical moment can be seen as a site of radical political potential involving ‘participation and engagement with discourses and taking action designed to change life situations (political, economic, social and cultural practices)’ (Skelton, 2010, p.147). At stake in this claim is the question of who is able to challenge injustices and indeed the possible forms for doing so. In building on the understanding of the political developed in Section 2.5, I am arguing that children in this critical moment can be understood as political actors, ‘engaging’ with hegemonic discourses and inequitable social relations as well as ‘taking action’, albeit partially within the cultural reality of play. Such a claim extends Corsaro’s (2005) extensive research demonstrating the ways in which children’s, often playful, activity within peer cultures challenges adult authority and, in the process, generational inequalities. Indeed, the actions of the child players in this critical moment offer a counterpoint to dominant forms of generationing which constitute young children as the outside limit of progressive social action and even unable to act collectively for change (Kallio, 2008; Skelton and Valentine, 2003).

I do not, however, want to overstate the acts in this critical moment. Whilst Cecilia and Kaltrina resisted the naturalised categories of gender Peter drew on, as well as their exclusionary implications, it would be an overstatement to attribute their acts to reasoned, critical explorations of the gendered order, or one that they themselves might attribute to a form of resistance. What these points do suggest, however, is the importance of considering the manner in which children in this critical moment acted in

ways which had the consequence, if not the intention, of engaging with injustices. Crucially, after Katz (2004), I am suggesting that such banal acts make space for new social imaginaries to emerge and have the potential to grow into something bigger and more sustained. As will be developed in the following sections, play offers an opening as opposed to an end point.

Three elements in this critical moment were crucial in enabling some of the more progressive aspects of this ludic activity to emerge, rather than remaining as a practice which only served to reproduce the existing social order. Importantly, as the next section will go on to discuss, these have significance for educational practices concerned with social transformation. One aspect of critical moment which is worthy of note was the use of playful responses as ways to negotiate competing interests of the child-players and even challenge the hegemonic discourses at work. The point early on in the critical moment when Kaltrina shouted: '*The monster! Come over!*' is just such an example. Kaltrina's loud invitation did not directly confront the sexist discourses which Peter drew on to claim an exclusively masculine space; it did, however, redefine the premises of the interaction. No longer was the group divided by gender, but – on Kaltrina's terms – they became united by their common interest in protection, or liberation, from the monster. This may be criticised as evading rather than challenging the sexist problematic; however, I want to suggest that it can be viewed as potent in that it re-scripted the possibilities of the moment. As the play narrative proceeded, Kaltrina's playful intervention made space for girls' presence in the ludic activity and it did so in a way which highlighted their contributions, strengths, and necessary involvement. The use of a playful intervention was crucial here in that it offered a theoretically, at least, more open space for re-imagining gendered social relations in the narrative and beyond, outside of more sedimented categories and inequalities in the everyday world.

A second feature which was important in opening up a more radical space relates to the emerging sense in this critical moment that the interactive space, the narrative, the other players, and 'all the fish' mattered to the players (cf Kraftl, 2013). In one sense this point is not unique to this particular critical moment, but characterises ludic activity more generally: as this thesis has argued, the embodied intensities of death/violence play at Westside Nursery made emotional investments and identifications matter in compelling ways. In this critical moment, it was notable that this 'mattering' motivated many of the more progressive actions against inequalities (cf Sayer, 2011). It mattered to Cecilia and Kaltrina that they were not excluded, motivating their early interventions against the voicing of an exclusive gendered order. The survival of the children, and

later the fish, became of crucial concern to the collective group of players, prompting a variety of efforts to stop the monster. Maintaining the interactive ludic space mattered: children offered contradictory or contestive suggestions for stopping the monster but did not 'block' other interjections to the extent of collapsing the play space. In this critical moment, things mattered not only at an individual level, but involved an orientation to others, including the non-human world.

This can in part be attributed to efforts to clarify the problems facing the players. Co-constructing a narrative about a dangerous monster who threatened both players and 'all the fish' enabled the players to orient their actions in a common field of struggle. Articulation was central to this endeavour, as can be seen in Kaltrina's initial 'invitation' as well as Kenza's on-going verbal explanations; however, verbalisation did not exhaust efforts to coordinate a shared ludic space. The players used sounds, such as rapid breathing and whispered voices, as well as physical movements to create this shared space and imbue the 'problem' of the monster with emotive force. Generating an understanding of their common problem – verbally, sonically, and physically – allowed a collective response to emerge: an effort to stop the plundering monster. Of note, however, was that the sense of a common problem and collective solution was open to contestation, either as part of the ludic narrative – as in Peter's concern that the monster could not be contained in a prison as suggested by Kenza – or otherwise. The common terrain of struggle did not involve, therefore, an imposition of a singular understanding or response to the horrific monster. It did allow for the emergence of a (contestable) collective strategy, which can be seen as a form of disidentification from narratives of the 'solitary hero' or charismatic leader. In this critical moment, then, there was a sense that children were involved – at least momentarily – in a collective, social endeavour, creating new imaginaries about what forms of action are possible in the face of a voracious and expanding enemy, even as small children. As Corsaro (2005) has argued persuasively, during peer culture play children develop shared knowledge responding to dilemmas, demands, and ambiguities through their collective activity.

In considering the critical moment of the devouring monster, I have suggested three factors were central to the way it became a site with progressive potential. The use of playful responses to moments of injustice allowed for contestations to be explored in the relatively more liminal or open space of the ludic. The fact that the narrative, and participation in it, seemed to matter deeply to the players provoked an orientation to others by generating a concern for creatures and phenomena beyond the self. The articulation and embodied enactment of a common terrain of struggle produced the possibility of an imaginary based on solidarity, important both because it works against

the short-termism of new capitalism which erodes the possibilities of sustained commitment to others (Sennett, 1998) and as a political strategy in the face of intensifying global inequalities. 'In these very fragmented times,' Mohanty (2003, p.530) urges, 'It is both very difficult to build.. alliances and also never more important to do so.' Whilst the three factors outlined here do not necessarily lead to ethical and progressive actions within all ludic activity nor do they necessarily traverse into the everyday world, they offer a way to begin to conceptualise the role of educational practice in relation to a central problematic in this thesis: the relationship between inequalities and death/violence play. It is to the implications of this thesis for educational practice that the chapter now moves.

9.2 Implications of the study for educational practices

This thesis has highlighted the complex and contextual nature of death/violence play, particularly in its relation to inequalities. This deconstructive process, however helpful, is ultimately unsatisfactory as an end point for this thesis as it does little to address the 'Monday morning problem' of education, or how to move 'from critique to processes of educational and social transformation' in the concrete actualities of educational settings and practices (Rikowski, 2002b, p.282). Therefore, this final section of the thesis will sketch out some tentative implications of the study, particularly for educational practice, in an attempt to move beyond deconstruction towards reconstruction. This is specifically motivated by a commitment to developing educational practices concerned with equity and social transformation, which can be broadly situated within critical or radical pedagogical approaches.⁴⁹ In so doing, this thesis builds on the crucial insights and elaborations of critical pedagogy combined with awareness that, as with any pedagogical approach, there are debates, concerns, and limitations, some of which will be taken up in the ensuing discussion.

9.2.1 Challenging reification of childhood and play

In moving towards proposals for responses to children's death/violence play, an initial point to highlight relates to a key contention of this thesis: the need to avoid reifying both play and childhood. This is particularly important given the centrality of play to conceptualisations of education, policy, and practice in relation to young children, as well as the impact of adult imaginaries about childhood on educational practices, as

⁴⁹ See, for instance Dardar *et al.* (2003a); McLaren (1998); and McLaren and Rikowski (2006) in relation to critical pedagogy generally. For social justice approaches to early childhood education specifically see MacNaughton (2000; 2009); Pelo (2008); and Robinson and Diaz (2006).

discussed at some length in Chapter 5. Specifically, it has been suggested that there is a necessity to move away from reductive and dichotomous readings of death/violence play which assert that it is either good or bad for children. In light of this argument, and in keeping with other professional and academic literature on death/violence play, the inadequacy of attempting to ban such play and the impossibility of determining causal links between death/violence play and non-ludic (future) aggression have been noted. At the same time, this thesis has also argued that death/violence play cannot be assumed *a priori* to be a 'natural' preoccupation of children, and therefore 'recuperable' as a source of literacy and other developmental gains, nor is it necessarily a site where ethical identities can be formed. Whilst death/violence play certainly raises numerous ethical-political questions, as the critical moments from Westside Nursery included throughout this thesis have highlighted, there is no guarantee that caring and justice-based exploration will necessarily take place or traverse the porous boundaries of ludic and everyday worlds. This thesis has also noted the inadequacies of idealisations of children and childhood including reductions of childhood to innocence, empty vessels, or futurity including as human capital. It has pointed to the dual problems of sentimentalising childhood through separation from the political-economy as well as romanticising childhood play as inherently full of 'freshness of energy' and 'openness to possibilities', a conceptualisation Katz (2004, p.257) slides into.

From an educational perspective, these complexities raise a particular tension. On the one hand, this thesis has demonstrated that ludic practices in death/violence play are implicated in the renewal of inequitable social relations whilst, on the other hand, this ludic activity can open up sites of ethical-political exploration and engagement, allowing – if just momentarily – for rupture in the hegemonic organisation of sociospatial relations. Ultimately, then, what this suggests is that there are no simple prescriptions for educational approaches to death/violence play. Instead, this thesis highlights the importance of ongoing consideration of the social ecology of death/violence play *in situ*, in its specific space-time location, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between death/violence play and inequalities. A series of questions for educators may help in this process: What assumptions are being made about childhood and the role of play and what are these productive of in relation to death/violence play? What other ways are there to view childhood and play and what new possibilities might these open up in relation to death/violence play? How do relations of inequality shape the conditions of possibility in death/violence play? What about the context allows educational practices which may seek to transform inequities in death/violence play to be 'successful' or not? Indeed, this thesis has offered some situated responses to these questions.

9.2.2 Challenging inequitable inscriptions

Of importance in educational approaches to death/violence play, and indeed ludic activity more broadly, is the necessity to interrogate the interaction between ludic characters and inequitable categorisations based on reified identities and social hierarchies in the everyday world, following the line of argument in Chapter 6.

Educators, with their often daily and long-term relationships with children in their care, are well-placed to consider how particular ascribed features of everyday world selves are routinely used by players as a constitutive limit for character possibilities, paying attention to questions such as: Are any children consistently assigned or denied roles based on ascribed characteristics such as gender, 'race', age, or ability? How does this happen? Are ludic characters barred by other players from acting in particular ways based on the assignment of characteristics drawing on everyday world inequalities? How might such reductive views of the possibilities for personhood, both in the everyday and ludic worlds, be effectively challenged?

Chapter 6 also argued that play characters can become 'fixed' on to childhood generally and particular groups of marginalised children. Such inscriptions are of particular concern given the contentious narratives and roles taken up in death/violence play. At Westside Nursery, death/violence play often included embodiment of horrendous acts: critical moments discussed in this thesis have included the roasting of babies and sexualised aggression, but such ludic activity also included vampiric attacks on other children, boiling the heads of various human and non-human creatures, and numerous attempts to shoot or maim others. Players in these ludic activities also assumed roles which appear less horrific – such as 'good' or vulnerable characters – but which, for instance, cite derogatory and constraining sexist and generational discourses. The point here is that aggressive and terrifying or weak and fearful characters are often central to the narratives of death/violence play and having these characters embodied in the ludic activity can contribute to deeply engaged and embodied investment in political-ethical explorations; notwithstanding times when such characters were only imagined rather than enacted by a child-player – as with the voracious monster in the critical moment above. The embodiment of particular characters and narratives becomes problematic, however, when these ludic characters come to be seen by other players and observers as representative of certain children's everyday selves, with particularly negative consequences when such characterisations draw on and in turn reinforce inequalities.

This suggests a need for continued critical reflection about when and how such inscriptions happen. This might involve, for instance, comparing assumptions about

children's play interests and characters with observations, a process which can highlight the more complex and varied embodiment of ludic characters. This can also include deliberation about questions such as: In what ways are children's play characters/acts linked to their everyday world selves in educator discourses? How do social inequalities, along with reified identity categories (e.g. boy, girl, Black, White, etc) and their naturalised modes of being, map on to ludic characters? Coming at this from another direction, educators can consider: What are some of the evaluative terms used in relation to particular children? In what contexts are these used and repeated? How do they relate to the ludic characters taken up by children? What are the ethical and political consequences of using these terms? Whilst these are general questions that can be posed in relation to all ludic activity, through interrogation of data generated at Westside Nursery, this thesis has offered some localised insights and directions for further investigation in relation to death/violence play, such as the way that the monstrous, weakness, strength, and desire are mapped from inequalities and ludic characters on to children themselves.

9.2.3 Critical educational practices and the ludic as a site of radical potential

Thus far, the complexity of death/violence play has been noted and some suggestions have been offered for interrogating reified assumptions about childhood and play, specifically the way inscriptions of the ludic onto everyday selves can reinforce inequalities. The idea that ludic activity is a site of radical potential has been introduced and will be developed in relation to educators' practices in this section. It should be evident by this point that in writing about play as a space of radical potential I am not suggesting that ludic acts necessarily transform existing inequalities or that there is any guarantee as to the sorts of imaginaries which might emerge in play. Instead, play can be seen as a site of struggle, but one that nonetheless offers a crucial, yet rarely considered, site for progressive pedagogical projects. The discussion that follows, then, will consider how an educational practice concerned with social transformation can build upon some of the potentials of play.

A key point here is simply to reiterate what is a common suggestion in early childhood literature: the significance of educators becoming involved in imaginative play. Where this thesis diverges is the type of involvement being advanced. Rather than engaging with children's death/violence play, or indeed other types of play, motivated by the desire to scaffold children's learning – particularly with predetermined early learning goals in mind – the suggestion here is that involvement in ludic activity is potent precisely because of its relative openness and potentials for examining the taken-for-

granted. Play holds open the possibility of different, even unexpected interventions, characters, and narratives. This is not to negate the powerful influence of the everyday as a constraint on play narratives or characters or to suggest that 'rules' do not develop in the course of play in particular peer cultures or settings. It is, however, to suggest that imaginative play with all its ambiguities and contestive nature provides a space and form to push and pull at hegemonic orderings which are regulated and reinforced in the everyday world. As noted in relation to the critical moment above, the use of playful responses to moments of injustice allowed for contestations to be explored in the slightly more liminal space of the ludic as opposed to calling up well-rehearsed or more entrenched discourses. The suggestion here is that educator participation in play – if approached within a frame of openness rather than attempting to contain play or recuperate it for developmental purposes – has the potential to allow for adults and children to engage together with the possibilities of a more just future.

Because imaginative play is largely constituted as an activity of childhood in the contemporary UK, children's experience as players can serve to destabilise adult-child power relations, as opposed to more formal learning or 'adult-led' activities. Indeed, both parents and educators in this study commented that they occasionally found imaginative play with children difficult because, as one mother explained, *'My son always tells me who to be in play and this can't be varied. He always gets his way. I can never win'* (Fieldnote, Group interview, 28th February 2012). In pointing to the potential of shifting adult-child relations in play in contrast to other activities, the move here is to suggest a disruption in generationed social relations, not to argue that generational inequalities disappear. On one level, this requires adults – including parents/carers and educators – to be aware of how their typical attitudes and generational authority may be challenged by the experience of play. At another level, this suggests that play offers an important site for adults and children to engage in co-constructing political-ethical understandings and new social imaginaries which are relatively open, rather than involving the imposition of pre-set analyses and forms of action imposed by drawing on generational authority.

Indeed, this goes some way towards addressing critiques of critical pedagogy which argue that it re-inscribes relations of 'paternalism' in which educators are viewed as necessarily more knowledgeable about the operations of inequality and therefore more 'emancipated' (Ellsworth, 1989). The characteristics of play provide a site where these relations and assumptions may be turned upside-down given the uncertainty that is a part of any play narrative development. Concretely, for educators, this involves a commitment to engaging in play within such a co-constructive frame: working towards

openness in the face of the uncertainty of play narratives rather than using their adult status to impose particular 'rules' of play engagement – such as fidelity to 'real' life – or to impose particular political-ethical discourses, no matter how laudable in intention these may be. As Burbules (2000, p.266) points out in relation to critical education, if the 'rules' of engagement are seen to be beyond question, 'then not only will certain voices or perspectives be excluded from possible participation' but this can stymie consideration of 'alternative frames that might be possible'.

This is not to suggest a need to move away from any guiding principles or aims for radical educational projects. A lack of clarity around principles, as Rikowski (2007) points out, means that 'critical pedagogy' can easily become reduced to 'individual cognitive emancipation' rather than a more collective vision of social transformation. What the data generated at Westside Nursery is suggestive of, however, is that such principles can be explored and re-imagined in many ways, including through the embodiment of narratives and characters which carry themes of domination and injustice.

The suggestion here is that rather than trying to stop, deter, or attempt to enforce ludic acts which appear to have more of a 'social justice' orientation – in many ways the suggestion offered by MacNaughton (2000) in responses to acts of inequality in play – here the suggestion is that educators hold up these themes to a social justice lens through ludic activity. This is not a relativist move away from any political-ethical evaluation, but a suggestion that the form of intervention in such play requires consideration and an indication that such evaluation can potentially be undertaken within the play itself, including in play which involves narratives of domination and aggression. In other words, a radical approach could be to use play, rather than discussion or rational explication, as a forum to highlight the implications of acts of subjugation. By way of a concrete – although by no means perfect – example, on one instance when a child-player turned and began to shoot me as I fed baby-dragons in my dragon-mother role, I cried: *'But my children! Who will feed them if you kill me?'* Such a response did not 'break' the ludic activity by stepping outside of the narrative or make recourse to adult status to enforce more 'just' behaviour, but in keeping with the narrative and characterisation encouraged consideration of the implications of this violent act.

The players' articulation and embodied enactment of a common field of struggle in the critical moment above offers another concrete way to hold ludic activity up to a social justice lens. Critical educators may use playful interjections that offer ways to establish an orientation to others and acts of solidarity within the play. For instance, in some

moments of play when children's 'dead' bodies were left unattended to, something which happened to children who seemed to have lesser status or value in the peer cultures, my character called out: *'Dalmar is dead. What will happen if we just leave him?'* and *'Isn't there anything we can do?'* In some of the cases when I made such a response, children began to take notice and make efforts to resuscitate the 'dead' child, orienting themselves towards another despite her/his lower position in the social hierarchy of the peer culture. This was not always the case, however, and needless to say I was uncomfortable in these situations, feeling that the logic of 'collateral damage' – where some bodies were viewed as expendable – was in operation. Notwithstanding the political-ethical dilemmas these situations raised for me, insisting that those 'dead bodies' were attended to, however, was not only outside the purview of this research project, but far more importantly such an act would have constituted an imperative for a particular form of ludic intervention, which I have just critiqued. In other words, ludic activity allows for different ways of responding to situations, including not responding and then considering the resultant impacts on others. By insisting on a particular form of intervention – such as 'reviving' the dead – these possibilities would have been substantially narrowed. From an educational perspective, however, jarring moments such as this could be used as a basis for further deliberations, in play or other forms, as I will go on to discuss.

What this highlights is that whilst ludic activity has radical possibilities, such potentials are not guaranteed, and ludic activity on its own is fundamentally insufficient as a project concerned with social transformation. Whilst the previous two suggestions focused on the importance, indeed value, of educators using ludic interventions as part of radical educational projects, the point here is that political-ethical questions and dilemmas opened up in ludic activity can continue to be explored both in future play and in other forms of radical educational practice. Concretely, this might involve provision of cultural resources which are engaged with relevant social justice themes. As Tobin (2000) points out, when children identify with inequitable interpellations, and here he is specifically referring to those in the media, this is not because they are naive or easy to influence, but in part because they have limited alternatives to draw on. Children in his study reproduced sexist discourses and bourgeois family values, for instance, but resisted racist discourses, which Tobin (2000) attributes to the prevalence of sovereignty activists amongst the children's families and anti-colonial projects including Hawaiian language schools. Indeed, the emphasis on the potentials of play in this thesis is not to diminish the importance of other forms of educational practice including critical and engaged dialogue in non-ludic forms, nor is it to replace other forms of progressive action against exploitation and social injustices. Political-ethical

explorations and disidentification in play are certainly important; however, efforts in localised sites of play will certainly not offer sufficient challenges to capital – as well as racism and sexism – because it is pervasive, dynamic, systemic, and globalised. Further, as efforts to theorise radical critical pedagogies have suggested, there is a need to move beyond the borders of the classroom and engage with broader social movements (Dardar, Baltodano and Torres, 2003b; McLaren, 1998). Concretely, the suggestion here is that questions and explorations in ludic activity, including death/violence play, can highlight areas for exploration beyond play. For instance, educators may respond to children’s localised questions and preoccupations voiced in play by building relevant connections with progressive individuals, organisations, and broader social movements. Such experiences can offer alternative sources to draw on in ludic activity as well as encourage an orientation of solidarity and social justice in various spheres of human activity.

In working towards a co-constructive approach to play, it is likewise important for educators to be open to challenges to their own ways of knowing and being. This involves a rethinking of play as a place where knowing (or at least ‘more knowing’) adults scaffold children’s learning, including about social justice issues and activism: indeed, ludic activity can be a place of transformative potential for adults as well as children. Without wanting to slip into a politics or view of research as ‘reflexive confession’ which replaces more radical intentions solely with work on the self (Burman, 2006), examples of challenges to my own ways of knowing and being are perhaps helpful here. I have written elsewhere about the way children’s screams in death/violence play at Westside Nursery transformed the way I listened to productions of voice quality (Rosen, 2014). These screams, which overflowed with meanings, were suggestive of the need to attend to voice quality as a non-given – but often reified – mode of meaning making, indication of care, and even non-verbal political expressivity. This encouraged me to think about politics and activism more broadly as replete with – both metaphoric and literal – pitch, timbre, rhythm, and volume.

By way of another example, in engaging with children as a co-player, I came to understand how central relationships are for conceptualising any radical pedagogical project. Seeking to engage with children as a co-player as part of the research methodology had the result of creating situations where I often strove to ‘be with’ (Suissa, 2006)⁵⁰ children. Here, relationships were necessarily foregrounded, rather

⁵⁰ Suissa (2006) is writing here about the parent-child relation, as unique and indeed distinct from educational and other relationships, including because teaching involves explicit pedagogical intentions. Despite this, her articulation of the importance of ‘being with’ children – in contradistinction to reductive functionalist views of adult-child relations – as an ethical orientation of creativity and openness is one that offers important lessons for the pedagogical relationship.

than efforts to support children's learning in relation to a particular set of predetermined goals or generate data, which in the most instrumental of terms can reduce children to research 'sources'. Importantly, 'being with' children in play created a space for us to engage with important themes, questions, and inequitable social relations. Advocating 'being with' children in educational settings, however, does create tensions with both institutional and attitudinal expectations about the role of educators. Whilst discussion of these tensions is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice it here to say that the suggestion is not that educational or research aims are unimportant and should be discarded. In contrast, I am noting how my own 'way of being' was challenged in the process of this study, leading me to consider how to reposition educational and research aims within what can centrally be understood as a relational framework where aims and methods are amenable to co-construction by the various participants involved in the encounter. This is also not to suggest that relationships can only be formed within play or that relationships have not been central to other progressive pedagogical projects. I am, however, noting both the importance of relationships to radical education as well as suggesting that ludic activity, because of its particular characteristics, offers one very productive site for such relational explorations.

Whilst there are many complicating factors motivating people to engage in play, in order for play with others to be accomplished, some form of engaged participation is necessary. Without people accepting ludic interventions, at very least, play falls apart and for play to continue, it is essential that players make some effort to maintain the ludic space. Consequentially here, this suggests that players necessarily have an investment in some aspect of the interactive space. Potentially this investment has to do with desiring interactions with the specific others involved in play, or in my case the necessity of generating research data; the critical moment above, however, suggests that even the desire to engage in play with others can lead to the production of relationships and narrative themes which come to matter to players individually but increasingly on a collective level. Through embodying and enacting characters with others in ludic activity I found myself coming to care about my co-players as well as the narratives – even when I may not have been as interested in the explorations when they initially began. I noted this in my field journal in a number of places, for instance:

'I found myself sighing 'not again' today when Walid approached me to say: 'I am Spiderman.' By the time we had gone on a series of adventures full of all kinds of dilemmas and controversies, all frustration had disappeared to the point that I am now having difficulty capturing those initial feelings here. Instead I am much more interested to write about the kinds of questions the play provoked for me: Are we more responsible to protect and care for those we are close to/intimate with? How much of our constitution of the 'baddie' has to do with fear or suppression of difference? How can I as a co-player bring forward

points of ethics and politics in play without imposing them on (less powerful) others e.g. children?’

(Fieldnote, 12th June 2012)

Whilst I did not raise these questions in this form during the play, the ludic activity provoked them and provided a lens to consider them. The contention here is that ludic activity offers a space for players to engage with others, including about political-ethical questions and concerns that preoccupy and matter, and importantly can come to matter collectively through the process of playing together.

The implications of this point for radical educational projects are significant, for one of the critiques often levelled is that critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on ‘rational’ dialogue and verbalised critique, can miss the affective and embodied aspects of social action including the investments people have in renewing the status quo (Ellsworth, 1989). As Kohli (1998, p.515) comments: ‘It became clearer and clearer to me that one did not change deeply held political, social, and philosophical positions simply by acquiring new knowledge or new perspectives through conversations with others.’ The Latin roots of the term ‘emotion’ are suggestive here: ‘emovere’ means to ‘agitate’ or ‘cause movement’. In line with what is constituted as a broadly cognitive theory of emotions, the point here is that already embedded within emotions are objects, values, and desire for a certain state of affairs. What we feel about people, things, and phenomena – both in the concrete and abstract – prompts our ‘desire and concern to produce or prevent change’ (Sayer, 2011, p.37). While political issues of inequality, domination, and exploitation generally need to be addressed through collective social action, participation in such movements is largely motivated by what matters or comes to matter to people, rather than only formal logic or rational dialogue. Given the embodied and affective intensities involved (see Chapter 7), I am suggesting then that ludic activity, including death/violence play, can serve as a site for ‘engaging in a politics of bodily and affective investment’ (McLaren, 1998, p.452) which is central to any radical pedagogical project.

The implications discussed here have focused on both challenging understandings of death/violence play and on the potentials for radical educational practices in response to such ludic activity. The discussion has been necessarily tentative as further research is needed into the pedagogical suggestions specifically and the significance of the study for policy and educational practices more broadly. Moreover, in many ways this study has reinforced a point with which it began: how little is known in context about children’s death/violence play and the need for ongoing exploration rather than simple educational prescriptions.

9.3 Concluding comments

This thesis has offered in-depth ethnographic insight into children's death/violence play in a London-based early childhood setting. Based on the account herein, an argument has been made that death/violence play is an ambiguous activity that can neither be simply condemned nor impartially endorsed. As such, this thesis is best viewed as offering a beginning, rather than end, in the study of death/violence play.

It has been demonstrated that death/violence play is neither a 'natural' nor neutral activity, but one that is insistently enacted in relation to often inequitable material and discursive sociospatial relations in the everyday world. Indeed, it is the entanglements of ludic and everyday worlds which lend explorations undertaken in death/violence play both intensity and potency with implications that exceed the bounds of the ludic activity itself.

Through the thesis, it has emerged that death/violence play is related to problematics of aggression and mortality, but also far more. In closely examining the multiple, and often contradictory, narratives and practices of educators and children in Westside Nursery in relation to death/violence play, it has been suggested that such play often serves as a site of and a trope for the reproduction of inequitable social relations, including through the inscription of ludic characters on children and childhood. The notion of dialogic bodies developed in this thesis offered an innovative approach to understanding the ways in which players come to (dis)identify with the positioned-practices, dispositions, and affects of their ludic characters as well as the ideologies and sociospatial relations they are embedded within.

Yet, small spaces of rupture, transgression, and disidentification have been noted in this embodied and deeply affective activity. Indeed, this thesis has argued that in the process of taking the world apart and putting it back together, ludic activity, including death/violence play, can develop relationships of ethical answerability (see section 3.3), collective narratives about what matters, as well as new social imaginaries. Despite the contemporary conflation of play and childhood, this thesis has suggested that perhaps ludic activity is a site for children and adults, both independently and together, to engage in radical projects concerned with social transformation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent letter – manger

18th February 2011

Re: consent for research study

Dear Eva,

I am an MPhil / PhD student studying at the Institute of Education, University of London. I am writing to obtain your consent for conducting my research at Westside Nursery from April 2011 – July 2012. My research will explore children's perspectives on play which involves themes of violence such as mythical, weapon, and superhero play.

I will attend Westside Nursery approximately once a week over the period to conduct ethnographic research. This means that I will participate with the children in their play to see what this type of play means from the children's perspective. I am interested in children's views about what happens in this play, who does and does not play, and how different children (such as girls and boys) play together or apart. I will be a student in the classroom which means I will not take on regular teacher roles in the classroom (such as discipline and guidance), but I will ensure the children's safety if necessary.

I will take field notes when I participate in and observe the children's play. I will also videotape the play so that the children and educators can participate in video revisiting sessions to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in relation to the play. Some recordings will also be transcribed and may be turned into still photographs. These photographs / recordings will not be posted on the internet. I will occasionally interview the children and educators; these interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. I also plan to involve interested children in doing research with me (such as data collection and analysis). This may involve the children in activities that involve taking photographs, participating in sorting activities, or interviewing each other. I will provide interested children with appropriate training in research methods.

I will work with you and your staff to determine times / places that will be best for this research activity to take place. Children and educators can decide not to participate or to join at any time. The Nursery, the children and the educators will not be identified by name in the research. Should any confidential details emerge during the fieldwork they will not be included in the PhD. In no way is this study intended as an assessment of individual children, educators, or your programme.

I have over fifteen years experience as an early childhood educator in Canada, and a current Criminal Record Bureau check in both the UK and Canada.

I think your staff and children will enjoy participating in this project, so I hope that you will complete the attached consent form and email it to me. If you have any questions or need further information, please feel free to email me (rachelrosen10@gmail.com).

Thank you for your consideration.

Rachel Rosen

Consent form

Please email this form to me at rachelrosen10@gmail.com by 15 March 2011.

Please check all that apply (✓):

I give my consent for _____ to be the site of Rachel Rosen's research as outlined above.

I consent to the use of audiotapes as described above.

I consent to the use of the use of video recordings as described above.

I consent to the use of the use of still photographs as described above.

Please indicate here if you are willing to allow video footage or still photographs taken at the setting to be used by Rachel Rosen *only* as part of presentations / publications about this PhD research *only*. (Consent from individuals in the footage / photographs will also be obtained prior to being used.)

Print Name

Signature

Position

Date

Appendix 2: Consent leaflet and form – educators

Whilst I viewed the educators (including the Head) as potential research participants, they were also gatekeepers in the sense that it was important for my study that they agree to my presence in the setting particularly given the type of practices I wanted to not only observe but potentially join. I began by meeting informally with the Head of the setting and the two Head teachers and then I meet with a larger group of nine educators. At this point, I made a brief PowerPoint presentation about the project based on the leaflet below and answered the educators' questions which included: How would I get consent from families? What would happen if educators or families did not consent? Would they be involved in discussing and reflecting on the data? Five out of the nine educators returned consent forms that day and the others – including those who had not attended the session – returned their consent forms to the Head shortly after. Three educators joined the setting over the course of the study and all gave consent to participate.

Do you have to take part?

You decide if you want to take part. Even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions. You can tell me that you will take part by signing the consent form.

Do you want more information?

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have about my research at any time. You can contact me on:

Rachel Rosen
0781 479 5704
rachelrosen10@gmail.com



**THANK YOU
FOR READING
THIS LEAFLET.**

Exploring young children's perspectives on mythic, weapon and superhero play

• April 2011 – July 2012 •

> INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS <



Please will you help with my research?

I am an MPhil / PhD student at the Institute of Education, University of London. I have over fifteen years experience as an early childhood educator in Canada, and a current Criminal Record Bureau check in both the UK and Canada.

Why is this research being done?

Children's mythic, weapon, and superhero play has rarely been studied from children's perspectives. I hope this project will help people to understand children's experiences from their point of view and enhance social justice within such play.

What questions will be asked?

I am interested in views about:

- what happens in pretend mythic, weapon, and superhero play,
- who does and does not play, and
- how different children (such as girls and boys) play together or apart.

What will happen during the research?

OBSERVATIONS →

I will participate in and observe the children's play. I will be a student in the setting and will not take on regular educator roles (such as guidance and discipline). I will ensure the children's safety if necessary. I will take field notes when I participate in and observe the children's play.

VIDEO RECORDING →

I will also video record the play so that you and the children can watch the video with me and tell me about your thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in relation to the play. Some recordings will also be transcribed and may be turned into still photographs.

INTERVIEWS →

I hope to ask you and the children questions during the project. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. I am not looking for right or wrong answers, only for what you think.

CHILDREN AS RESEARCHERS →

I will involve interested children in doing research with me (such as data collection and analysis). This may involve the children taking photographs, participating in sorting activities, or interviewing each other. I will provide interested children with appropriate training in research methods. I will work with you and the other staff to determine the best times and places for this research activity to take place.

Who will be in the project?

All children, families, and educators at the setting will be invited to participate in the project.

Who will know that you have been in the research?

I will change all the names in my reports so that no one knows who said what and will keep recordings and notes in a safe place. I will not tell anyone what you tell me unless I think someone might be hurt. If so, I will talk to you first about the best thing to do.

Could there be problems for you if you take part?

I hope you will enjoy talking to me, but you can decide to stop at any time. In no way is this project intended as an assessment of individual children, educators, or the setting. No photographs or video will be posted on the internet. If you have any problems with the project, please tell me or the Children's Centre Manager. The project has been reviewed by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and was approved on 29 January 2011.

What is in it for you?

Different people have varying experiences and perspectives. I hope that you will welcome the opportunity to make your own voice heard.



Consent form

Please email this form to me at rachelrosen10@gmail.com or give it to the Children's Centre Manager by **15th April 2011**.

Please check all that apply (✓):

- I consent to participating in Rachel Rosen's research as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of audiotapes as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of the use of videotapes as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of the use of still photographs as described in the project leaflet.

- Please indicate here if you are willing to allow video footage or still photographs involving you to be used by Rachel Rosen *only* as part of presentations / publications about this PhD research *only*.

Print Name

Signature

Date

Appendix 3: Original consent leaflet and form – families

With the help of the Head, I arranged to meet with families to discuss the project and request consent for their child's participation. I also used the opportunity to discuss their views and questions about their children's death/violence play. I did two presentations based on the leaflet below: one for four Bangladeshi families with the translation help of one of the educators and one primarily in English (for ten parents/carers) although parents/carers did do some informal translation for each other. A presentation for Arabic-speaking families was cancelled due to lack of attendance. While these parents/carers represented only a small portion of those in the setting, the Head fielded many questions about the project from those who did not attend, curious especially about why anyone would want to study their child's play. All families who attended the sessions consented to their child's participation in the study; however, many declined to have videos or photographs of their child shown to anyone beyond the setting (such as at academic forums).

Do you have to take part?

You decide if you want to take part. Even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions. You can tell me that you and your child will take part by signing the consent form. I will only involve your child if you approve and s/he wants to participate in the research. I will ask the children during sessions and make it clear that they can drop out if they wish.

Do you want more information?

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have about my research at any time. You can contact me on:

Rachel Rosen
0781 479 5704
rachelrosen10@gmail.com



**THANK YOU
FOR READING
THIS LEAFLET.**

Exploring young children's perspectives on play

• April 2011 – July 2012 •

> INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES <



Please will you help with my research?

I am a PhD student at the University of London. I have over fifteen years experience as an early childhood educator in Canada, and a current Criminal Record Bureau check in both the UK and Canada.

Why is this research being done?

Does your child play games like Ben10 and Spiderman? Does she or he play with pretend guns and swords? Does she or he play games about dragons, Queens, and warriors? I hope this project will help people to understand children's experiences from their point of view and enhance social justice in such play.

What questions will be asked?

I am interested in views about:

- what happens in pretend mythic, weapon, and superhero play,
- who does and does not play, and
- how different children (such as girls and boys) play together or apart.

What will happen during the research?

OBSERVATIONS →

I will participate in and observe the children's play. I will ensure the children's safety if necessary. I will take field notes when I participate in and observe the children's play.

VIDEO RECORDING →

I will also video record the play so that the children and educators can watch the video with me and tell me about their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in relation to the play. Some recordings will also be transcribed and may be turned into still photographs.

INTERVIEWS →

I hope to ask you and the children questions during the project. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. I am not looking for right or wrong answers, only for what you think.

CHILDREN AS RESEARCHERS →

I will involve interested children in doing research with me (such as data collection and analysis). This may involve the children taking photographs, participating in sorting activities, or interviewing each other. I will provide interested children with appropriate training in research methods.

Who will be in the project?

All children, families, and educators at the setting will be invited to participate in the project.

Who will know that you have been in the research?

I will change all the names in my reports so that no one knows who said what and will keep recordings and notes in a safe place. I will not tell anyone what you or your child tells me unless I think someone might be hurt. If so, I will talk to you or your child first about the best thing to do.

Could there be problems for you if you take part?

I hope you and your child will enjoy talking to me, but you and your child can decide to stop at any time. In no way is this project intended as an assessment of individual children, educators, or the setting. No photographs or video will be posted on the internet. If you have any problems with the project, please tell me or the Children's Centre Manager. The project has been reviewed by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and was approved on 29 January 2011.

What is in it for you and your child?

Different children and families have varying experiences and perspectives. I hope that you and your child will welcome the opportunity to make your own voice heard. I also think that your child will enjoy learning about how to do research.



Consent form

If you need this information to be translated, please contact me via email rachelrosen10@gmail.com or speak to the Nursery manager.

Please submit this form to me or the educators at Westside Nursery by **31 May 2011**.

I am the parent or legal guardian of _____.

Child's Name

Please check all that apply (✓):

- I give my consent for myself and my child to participate in Rachel Rosen's research as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of audiotapes as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of the use of video recording as described in the project leaflet.
- I consent to the use of the use of still photographs as described in the project leaflet.

- Please indicate here if you are willing to allow video footage or still photographs involving your child to be used by Rachel Rosen *only* as part of presentations / publications about this PhD research *only*.

Print Name

Signature

Date

Appendix 4: Final consent form – families

Research Project: Exploring young children's perspectives on play

Rachel Rosen, rachelrosen10@gmail.com, 0781 479 5704

I am the parent / carer of _____.

Print Child's Name

As described in the project project leaflet, I consent to: (please ✓ all that apply)



Rachel speaking with my child about the research project.



The use of audiotapes.



The use of the use of video recording.



The use of photographs.

Print Name

Signature

Date

Appendix 5: Consent leaflet – children

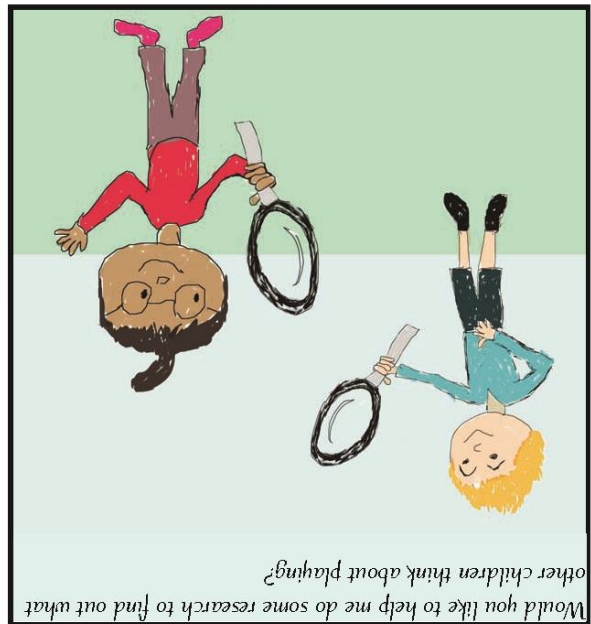


Mark your name:

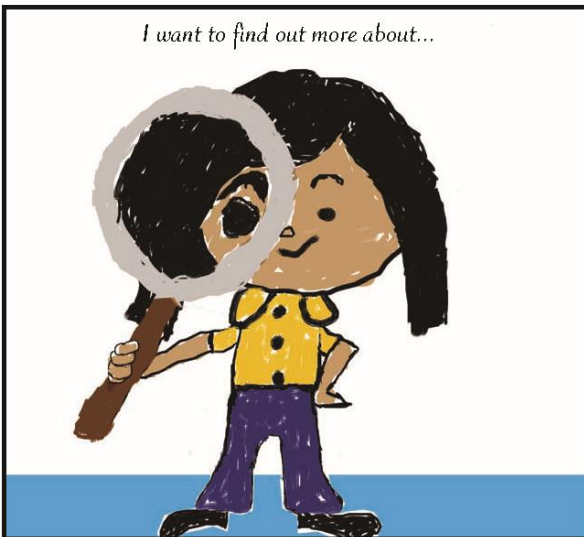
Name:

Date:

Thank you!



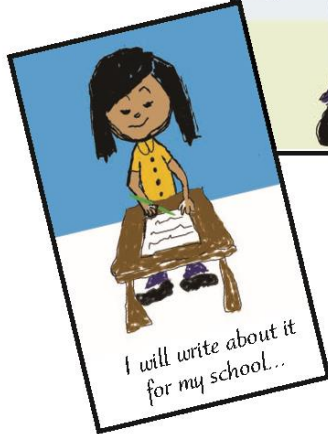
Exploring young children's perspectives in mythic, weapon, and superhero play
 A leaflet for children about my research project
 Rachel Rosen: rachelrosen10@gmail.com



...and tell other people what you think.



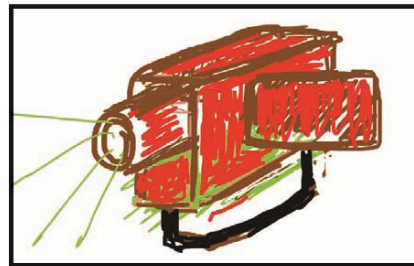
You can talk to me, play with me, and help me when you want. But you don't have to. You can stop whenever you want.



Can I ask you questions about playing?



Is it ok if I record this?



Is it ok if I video record you when you play?



Appendix 6: Prospective interview questions – child interviews

Explain project and discuss ethical issues (e.g. right to stop or not answer any questions they don't want to, possibility of video recording).

General questions:

- What kind of things do you like to play?
- Who do you like to play with in Nursery? Why?
- Sometimes you pretend to be different things. Who do you like to be when you play? Anything you don't like to be?
- What kinds of things do you know about those characters? How do you know?
- What does it feel like when you're pretending to be that character?
- Are you like that character in any way?
- Sometimes you do 'scary' play / superhero play / dieing play. Can you tell me about that?
- Are there any things that you aren't allowed to play at nursery?
- Do you want to tell me anything else for my research?

Questions about playing death:

- I've noticed that some children pretend to die when they are playing. I wonder why?
- How do you know someone is dead when you are playing?
- When someone pretends to die, who do you help and who don't you help? How do you decide?

Some people think...

- If you play at fighting you will fight for real.
- Children just copy what they see on TV / movies.
- Boys play fight more than girls.
- Pretending to be someone helps you to feel what they feel.
- People play at being scared so they aren't so scared of real things.

...lots of people don't agree. What do you think?

Appendix 7: Prospective interview questions with character photograph – child interviews

Explain project and discuss ethical issues (e.g. right to stop or not answer any questions they don't want to, possibility of video recording).

I have some pictures to show you of different characters.

- Who do you like pretending to be when you play - any of these characters?
Why / why not? What's good about being this character?
- Can anyone be this character? Why / why not?
- Do you ever pretend that other people are this character?
- Do you like to be a baddy when you play? A goodie?
- Are you like this character in any way?
- How do you know about this character?
- Do you want to tell a story with these characters?

Appendix 8: Sample video revisiting questions – child interviews

Explain project and discuss ethical issues (e.g. right to stop or not answer any questions they don't want to, possibility of video recording).

Terror monster: Watch minutes 0.29 - 1.45 and 7.49 – 9.30 of video: Ian and Aamaal

Potential questions:

- What are your responses to the video? How does it feel to watch yourself?
- What were you doing?
- Tell me more about who you were pretending to be.
- Ian – you changed a lot. What makes you change? How did you change? Why?
- How does it feel to be a _____?
- Aamaal – you had lots of magic. Where did it come from? Why did you need it?
- You also use the rope a lot to trap monsters. How did you get that idea?
- You said that only the daddy tiger eats children? Why? When does he start doing that? What about mother tigers? Are babies ever dangerous /scary? Children?
- Do you like playing with these children?
- Is it really scary to play?
- Do you feel mean when you are a monster?
- Do you think anyone of these kids are really scary? Really going to hurt you?
- I have seen lots of children play monsters here at Nursery. Why do you think that is?
- Can anyone be a monster? Are there good monsters? Baby monsters? What makes them bad?
- Can anyone be a fairy? Are there good / bad fairies?
- Do you know any real monsters?

Appendix 9: Interview schedule – educators (July 2011)

At a weekly staff meeting, I invited any educator who was interested to sign up for an interview. Being supportive of my project, the Head agreed to provide 'cover' for staff allowing them to be interviewed during their paid hours; this certainly affected the positive responses to participating in the interviews. The following semi-structured interview schedule included questions about the educator's background, feelings and approaches to death/violence play, as well as an excerpt from my field notes about a play episode involving one of their 'key children'. Here I hoped to gain a further perspective on the child's activity, as well as provoke reflection on death/violence play.

.....

Thanks! I would like to ask you a bit about your thoughts on play about death and violence and ask about one of your key children. And anything else you want to tell me.

Explain project and discuss ethical issues (e.g. right to stop or not answer any questions they don't want to, possibility of audio recording).

Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (background, how you came to Westside Nursery, etc)

Your thoughts on play about death / violence play...

- How do you feel about death/violence play? What worries or excites you?
- What experiences do you have with death/violence play as a child? As an educator?
- What if anything are you wondering about this type of play?

Share a brief scenario involving a child for whom an educator is a key person:

- Are these children you typically see her playing with?
- Does she often role play?
- Are these common themes of her role play?
- Are these interactions similar or different to what you would expect? Why?

Appendix 10: Interview schedule – educators (July 2012)

In this second set of individual interviews with educators, I followed up on a series of specific questions I had encountered in analysing my data. I also requested background information on some of the children who were key participants in my study.

....

Thanks! I would like to ask you a bit about your thoughts on play about death and violence, ask about your key children, and anything else you want to tell me.

Explain project and discuss ethical issues (e.g. right to stop or not answer any questions they don't want to, possibility of audio recording).

Death/violence play questions:

- As you know, I am studying children's imaginative play about death and violence. I know we have talked about it throughout my time here, but can we start with any thoughts about changes in death/violence play over the course of this research – in children's or your activities and thinking.
- Do you get involved in such play at nursery in any way? Can you give me an example? What happened? What was your role? How did you feel in this role? Did you experience any tensions?
- Asking you to put yourself in other people's shoes: What do children / other educators consider to be your perspective on death and violence play?
- Do you tell families / write in planning book or child's book about death and violence play? Why?
- One of the things that I have been thinking about during this research is the way that children identify with particular characters and being those characters in play makes possible ways of being beyond the play. What are your thoughts on this?

Setting policies and practices:

- Noticed that death and violence play / imaginative play is generally not discussed in planning meetings / staff meetings. Do you find this? Why do you think that is? How do you feel about it? As a team, what is your pedagogical approach to such play?
- Noticed educators intervene to stop particular activities: running with sticks, climbing fence, physical rough and tumble.... How do you feel about these activities? Can you say a bit about your response to these activities and why?

- Are there rules about toys from home being brought to the nursery?
- How are lunch groups, story groups, key worker groups decided? How do educators feel about this?
- Have you noticed any changes with funding changes for early years or changes to benefits for families?
- What are your preferred responsibilities at work here?

I'm presenting next week – is there anything in particular you would like to hear about?

Can you tell me anything you think is appropriate about these children for whom you are a key worker:

- Backgrounds of families: (family configuration, language spoken at home, work/study/benefits, how long in London and from where, involvement in nursery)
- What sort of an experience has s/he had at nursery?
- Transition to reception coming soon: how do you think particular children feel about / will manage that transition? How do you feel about it?

Appendix 11: Group interview questions – families

- What does your child like to play?
 - Does your child play games like Ben10 and Spiderman?
 - Does s/he play with pretend guns and swords?
 - Does s/he play games about dragons, monsters, and wild animals?
- Why do you think some children engage in play with these themes (including about death and violence)?
- What inspires your child's imaginative play?
- How do children influence play narratives?
- Do you have any stories to share about your child's play?
- What do you think is important for your child in her/his play?
- What concerns, if any, do you have about your child's play?
- What is important for you, if anything, about your child's play?

Appendix 12: Descriptive codes

In the initial weeks of the ethnography, I began to develop a series of descriptive codes seeking to approach and even sort my data into manageable and possibly comparable chunks. These descriptive codes were terms which focused on broad and summary characteristics, such as the main themes of observed play, spaces of play, resources used in play, types of interactions, and methodological points. Many of these were initially derived from the literature I had looked at about death/violence play and others – such as play themes – developed as I continued to observe. I read through each piece of data (field notes or interviews) and assigned codes to the text, often assigning multiple codes for one piece of data. In general, I coded chunks of text rather than short phrases or single words based on the emphasis in my research questions on context and process. I used this set of descriptive codes from roughly January 2011-December 2011, when the Autumn session ended.

Appendix 13: Relational codes

In January 2012, I began to develop a new series of codes whilst maintaining some of the more helpful descriptive codes. For instance, I found the codes about topics of play to be helpful in sorting through the material and clarifying my decision to focus on 'death/violence' play, rather than continuing to conflate it with 'superhero play'. This new set of codes was slightly more analytic and relational as it focused on relationships both in and between the data, interactions, and processes. For example I developed codes in relation to specific strategies used to influence the play such as assigning characters, narrative interventions, and meeting other players' interests. The codes were also more specific as I worked to include themes which had begun to emerge as a particular focus of the data being generated and analysed, such as 'embodiment' and the attribution of 'value' to actions, people, and resources. I continued to develop these codes throughout the rest of the project: January 2012-July 2012. I re-read through the early data and re-coded it as well as coding all new data with the relational codes as I generated it.

Appendix 14: Westside Nursery routine

Time	Child activity	Educator activity
8.15-9.15	Extended hours provision: open activity in the upstairs crèche.	Care of children in extended provision. Set-up of daily activities (approximately 8.45-9.15)
9.15-9.25	Main doors open for children and parents/carers. Children hang up personal items in the peg room and sign in on photo boards in main ground floor room.	Greet families at key person carpets.
9.25-11.05	'Open choice' of activity on the ground floor (inside and outside) and basement. Snack laid out and available at approximately 10.00. Some children required to participate in 'adult-focus activities'.	Variety of set 'roles' which were assigned on a daily basis. Some roles were more predetermined e.g. 'adult-focus' involved developing, facilitating, and documenting an activity intended to help children meet particular learning outcomes in the EYFS. Others were more flexible such as 'float' which allowed the educator to move around and engage in activities in a pre-set area of the setting.
11.05 – 11.20	Clean up. Read book on key group carpet.	Clean up.
11.20 -11.30	Move to assigned story group area.	Organise story groups and continue cleaning.
11.30-12.10	Attend assigned story group sessions.	Lead story groups.
12.10 -12.15	Return to carpets to await pick up / sign out or wash hands for lunch.	Greet parents/carers.
12.15-12.45	Eat lunch in assigned lunch group / table.	Lunch break. Lunch groups facilitated by non-regular educators.
12.45-12.55	Main doors open for part-time children and parents/carers. Children hang up personal items in the peg room and sign in on photo boards in main ground floor room. Full-time children go directly	Greet families at key person carpet.

	to activities.	
12.55-2.25	'Open choice' of activity on the ground floor (inside and outside) and basement. Snack laid out and available at approximately 1.40. Some children required to participate in 'adult-focus activities'.	Variety of set 'roles' which were assigned on a daily basis.
2.25-2.40	Clean up. Read book on key group carpet.	Clean up.
2.40-2.45	Move to assigned story group area.	Organise story groups and continue cleaning.
2.45-3.10	Attend assigned story group sessions.	Lead story groups.
3.10-3.15	Return to carpets to await pick up / sign out	Greet parents/carers.
3.15-5	Extended hours provision: provision of tea and open activity in the upstairs crèche.	Daily planning meeting: 3.15-4. Set-up for next day or weekly full staff meeting: 4-5