

## **Between play and the quotidian: Inscriptions of monstrous characters on the racialized bodies of children**

Dr Rachel Rosen  
Lecturer, MA Sociology of Childhood and Children's Rights

Department of Childhood, Families, and Health  
UCL Institute of Education  
Room 301, 18 Woburn Square  
London, UK  
WC1H 0AL  
Email: [r.rosen@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:r.rosen@ioe.ac.uk)

**Biography:** Rachel Rosen is a Lecturer in the Sociology of Childhood at the UCL Institute of Education. Her research is concerned with the impact of intersecting inequalities on children's everyday lives, including the ways in which childhood is classed, 'raced', and gendered.

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**Abstract:** Despite critiques pointing out that racism has become normalised in early childhood settings, relatively little attention has been paid in such contexts to the everyday practices in which racial inequities are made. In seeking to interrogate the ways in which racism roosts in the routine, this article interrogates quotidian responses to children's playful activity, drawing on data generated in an ethnographic study in a London-based nursery. The paper argues that the imaginative characters players embody become 'fixed' on particular children – when these characters coincide with reified assumptions about the raced, classed, and gendered body – whilst serving as mobile resources for others. Such reification, which is a concentration of complex historic and contemporary social relations in the political economy, is not only harmful and unjust but limits understandings of racialization and inequity.

**Keywords:** racism, racialization, early childhood, imaginative play, monsters

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*'Noticing the way in which meanings are located on the body has at least the potential to disrupt the current racializing processes.'*

*(Alcoff 1999, 25)*

As critical scholars of 'race' have pointed out, racism does not reside in the realm of the extra-ordinary but is part of the fabric of British history and the contemporary, despite attempts to declare a post-racial détente (Redclift 2014). Whilst racism cannot be understood without reference to colonialism, uneven power relations and the international division of labour in a highly unequal global world, it also roosts in the routine – those everyday practices and embodied relationships which both sustain, and potentially shift, the coordinates of racial inequalities. One such 'intimate space' (Mishra Tarc 2013) is the ludic, or non-directed imaginative play. In the minority world, dominant Rousseauian-influenced ideas about children's innocence and 'natural' proclivities (Ailwood 2003), combined with the scholarisation of childhood (Qvortrup 1995), have created conditions where young children are expected, and often do, spend much of their time in early childhood settings engaged in playful activity. This makes the ludic a central site of children's intimate, everyday interactions despite its often fantastical characteristics. This article considers the way that

quotidian responses to children's playful activity, specifically about monsters and the monstrous, are implicated in the process of racializing bodies and the production of accompanying inequities.

Notwithstanding shifts in UK education policy and practice, racism and racial inequalities have, as Gillborn (2005) points out, remained conspicuously absent from discussion. This has continued under the current Coalition government which more generally 'attempts to airbrush 'race' from existence while re-inscribing its borders and legislating its pathologizing effects' (Redclift 2014, 586). This silence is particularly striking in relation to early childhood education. For instance, in the statutory national curriculum for the early years (DfE 2012), 'race' and racism are never mentioned and the 'more sanitized concepts' (Gillborn 2005, 493) of 'equality of opportunity' and 'anti-discriminatory' practice occur only once. The absence of comment on racism in policy does not, however, mean that it is not present in its pernicious effects. For instance, Bradbury (2011) argues that in a context where schools need to prove that they are 'adding value', there has been a differential deflation of assessment scores pupils in the English early years system.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, across England, children categorised as 'white' or 'mixed background' were assessed above the national average and a lower proportion of those categorised as 'Asian', 'Chinese' and 'black' were evaluated as having reached 'a good level of development', the terminology used in the statutory assessment of children at age five (DfE 2013).

Critical research investigating the impacts of 'race', class and gender on attainment outcomes have largely focused on secondary schooling. This may relate to the relative absence of more formal instruments of measurement and standardised testing in early education (Bradbury 2011). It is also emblematic, however, of the intersections of 'race' and generation. There has been a tendency to abstract young children – and institutions such as preschools which are dedicated to early childhood – from inequitable social relations (Siraj-Blatchford 2010; MacNaughton 2005). In dominant imaginaries, young children are yet-to-be-socialised, a form of 'human becoming' to use Qvortrup's (1994) evocative phrase. By extension, young children are often considered developmentally unable to act in ways which are anything but forms of 'pre-prejudice' (Vandenbroeck 2007). Suffice it here to say that not only have accounts of development as predictable, linear and age-based, which the notion of 'pre-prejudice' is based upon, been subjected to significant critique (Burman 2008); but, this conceptualisation falls into the trap of conflating racism with intention, rather than outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Early years educators in England are required to conduct observational assessments of children following developmental criteria outlined in statutory 'early learning goals'. When children are 5-years-old, educators are required to complete rating scales in the 'Early Years Foundation Stage Profile' – the focus of Bradbury's research. Assessment results are made public through league tables, part of the broader climate of marketization of education.

Adult imaginaries of childhood also confine young children to a state of innocence and, as a result, assume the need to protect them from the harsh realities of the 'adult' world, to which racism is assumed to be confined. Crucially, these imaginaries of childhood 'often serve... as an excuse not to take up... ethical and political discussion' in early childhood contexts (Vandenbroeck 2007, 26-27).

As a significant body of scholarship indicates, however, young children are both aware of, and make use of, racialized discourses in their everyday interactions, including in the ways that these interact with other, often inequitable, social relations such as gender (Connolly 2003; MacNaughton and Davis 2009; e.g. Skattebol 2005). For instance, Skattebol's (2005, 193) Australian early years' research demonstrates the way that a group of boys established group cohesion 'through the naming of outsiders as a common enemy'. She contends that being a 'goodie' in the play narrative became associated with Whiteness; boys of colour were positioned as 'baddies', risking rejection from the play if they refused such positioning. MacNaughton and Davis (2009) argue that children's reiterations of local markers of 'race' and attributions of value take shape within, and are irrevocably linked to, the political economy of racism more broadly.

Brown and colleagues (2010) indicate a need to look for the 'strange in the familiar', paying heed to processes of racialization and racism in taken-for-granted practices in early childhood. In taking up their call, and as a contribution to the emerging body of literature on racism and early childhood, this paper will consider responses of both children and educators to children's playful enactments of monsters and the monstrous and the way that this intertwines with processes of racialization. The paper will begin by laying out the ontological ground, emphasising that 'race' (and indeed class and gender) is 'real', directly tied to the materiality of the body and embodied experience. Following Alcoff (1999), this is not a move to re-instantiate 'race' as biological fact, a spurious and justifiably critiqued claim, but a recognition of the way that bodily diversity is assigned meaning through the social, where moral and economic valuations are inscribed and 'stuck' to certain bodies. With this ground laying complete, the paper moves on to argue that ludic characters become 'fixed' on particular children, when they coincide with reified assumptions about the raced, classed, and gendered body, whilst serving as mobile resources for others. In conclusion, the paper argues this is not only harmful and unjust but limits understandings of racialization and inequality. In this way, the discussion is intended as a contribution to a body of critical scholarship concerned with social and economic justice, where research is understood 'as a first step towards forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site' (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005, 305) and educational practices more broadly.

## Inscribing class, 'race', and gender on the body

Gunaratnam (2003, 32-33) points out that critical researchers of racism operate within a 'treacherous bind': 'Our very concern with naming and examining 'race' and ethnicity (often in order to uncover oppressive relations of power), always runs the risk of reproducing 'race' and ethnicity as essentialized and deterministic categories that can (re)constitute these very power relations.' At stake here is the ontological status granted to 'race'. If 'race' is a social construct, does that mean it is not real? How can scholarship expose the impacts of racism without using racial categories to identify its differential impacts? How can the presence, and even materiality, of racialized categories be conceptualised?

In her phenomenological account of 'race', Alcoff (1999) provides a useful way to navigate these questions. On the one hand, understood in purely biological terms, 'race' is not real (hence the use of scare quotes): decades of research demonstrate that racial categories and distinctions do not map natural fissures or homogenous and bounded groups. To claim that 'race' is unreal, however, negates the ontology of 'race' both in terms of its referents and effects. Bodily diversity, Alcoff points out, is a real referent to which racial categories gesture<sup>2</sup>; however, she is at pains to point out that those material differences which we grant significance and assign value to are both contingent and deeply implicated within historically sedimented social relations. 'Race', she argues, can also be understood as real in its effects. For instance, the political economy, institutions and educational policy are implicated in processes of delineating and creating racial collectivities where, for instance, differential attainment in schooling becomes seen as rooted in naturalised ethnic and class characteristics rather than structures of inequality (Bradbury 2011; Gillborn 2010). 'Race' is real in subjective ways: it has implications for personhood and bodily experience, which can help to explain why categories of 'race' continue to have deep resonance for people in their everyday lives (Gunaratnam 2003). Perception of bodily differences, for instance, is already 'preceded by racism' as an organising principle for what we see and how we assign meaning to it (Alcoff 1999, 18). Because racial categories often operate in a 'visual register', with meaning assigned to those aspects of the body which we can see and which *appear* largely unchangeable by the social (e.g. phenotype), this works to make 'race' itself seem natural and immutable.

It is not, however, just the assignment of bodies to particular categories which require attention, but the way that the visual register of racism serves to racialize certain bodies in

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<sup>2</sup> In historically shifting constructions of 'race', visual aspects of the body are not the only referent, as can be seen in the rising Islamophobia and racialization of migrants and asylum seekers in the UK context (Redcliff 2014; Cole and Maisuria 2010).

ways that others are not. Cultural theorist Manthia Diawara (Kolbowski and Diawara 1998), provides the example of Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*: both are viewed by the spectator as embodying a form of 'cool' connected in the popular imaginary to Black, working class masculinity. The important distinction is that 'cool' appears to be 'immanent' to Jackson, whilst cool is a resource 'transported through' Travolta's body. In other words, some bodies are essentialised – they are the characteristics they are seen to embody – while others embody the *same* characteristics as detachable resources which can be discarded when they no longer retain their symbolic and material value. When 'cool' becomes synonymous with criminality and violence it can be shed, but only if it is not seen to be a natural disposition fixed to the body (Skeggs 2004). In developing Diawara's argument, Skeggs (2004, 13) argues that whether characteristics 'stick' or not is the result of historical processes of inscription: 'The way value is transferred onto bodies and read off them, and the mechanisms by which it is retained, accumulated, lost or appropriated.' Particular characteristics are fixed on to marginalised social groups through historical inequities, 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: as in the example of 'cool', the value (or not) of a particular characteristic lies in its potential to be a mobile resource, detachable from the body. Ultimately, processes of inscription and valuation, Skeggs suggests, serve to reify categories of difference and, in effect, 'make' unequal social relations.

In grappling with the 'treacherous bind' of critical research on racism which opened this section, Gunaratnam (2003) argues the need to work both with and against racial categories. In acknowledging that 'race' continues to be real in its effects, research may work with it, invoking 'temporary moments of closure' in the use of prevailing racial categories. At the same time, in working against 'race' and ultimately for its dissolution (Paul 2014; Gilroy 1998), analysis needs to open up these very same categories by paying heed to which bodies become racialized and in what ways, in order to understand the constructed, relational, and intersectional character of these processes. It is this effort of working both with and against 'race', including examination of the ways in which certain characteristics become essentialised on some bodies and mobile resources for others, which will inform this paper.

### **'Race' and the monstrous**

'Race' has a particular and lengthy historical relationship with the monstrous, marked by a persistent continuity in processes whereby 'monsters' are constructed in racialized terms

(Braidotti 1999). An explication of the relationship between 'race' and the monstrous is the focus of this next section.

The word monster comes from the Latin word *monstrum*, meaning 'object of dread', 'abomination', 'cruelty', and 'terror'. Indeed, both historically, and in the contemporary, monsters are potent symbols used by both adults and children to represent generalised fears and anxieties. Monsters feature in children's media ranging from traditional fairy tales to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Disney's popular *Monsters Inc* film. Monsters and monstrosity have also been used as cultural tropes to signify more specific political fears, including hyper-consumption, unbridled expansionism, and the destruction of non-renewable resources associated with global capitalism (McNally 2011). But monstrous otherness is also used as a symbol of an entirely different order: to mark 'difference' from dominant views of subjectivity which are grounded in 'masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and Christian values' (Braidotti 1999, 293). Again the Latin roots are suggestive here as the word also comes from *monere*: to warn. Meretoja (2004) argues this act of indication refers to showing that which is considered 'abnormal'.

Braidotti (1999, 293) tracks the racialization of the monstrous in writings from antiquity about far flung 'races' existing 'on the edge of civilization' to the present, noting the ways in which those seen to be most distant from this centre, both geographically and figuratively, are constructed as the most monstrous. Her account traces the conflation of monstrosity and 'race' through colonialism where, for example, colonized people were transported as 'specimens' and displayed in human exhibits in Europe arguing that: 'Ethiopian, Indian, African and Asian 'monsters' came to be inscribed in these narratives of colonialist teratology' (Braidotti 1999, 294). Scholars note the way the Black male body in particular has been conflated with aggressive monstrosity, danger, evil, or savageness: the 'Other' to the innocence and purity of Whiteness (Yancy 2005; Joan W. Howarth 1997). Those racialized and gendered as Black men (and boys), from slavery to the present, have, according to Liggins (2007, 29), 'been represented as the monster that haunts the imaginations of white American society'.<sup>3</sup>

These views of Black working class masculinity have particular salience when considered alongside an enduring conception of children as savage 'animals' (Mills 2000). With deep roots in puritanical views which construed childhood as rooted in original sin (Valentine 1996) and the ideas of 17<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, childhood

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst representations of 'race' have specific histories and are enacted locally, racism 'moves' and circulates globally (Mishra Tarc 2013): with its particular history of colonialism and close relationship with the USA, this racist construction resonates in British society as well.

becomes seen as a state of 'being as yet unschooled and untamed' (Spry 2013, 6). Whilst Ladson Billings (2011) suggests that young Black boys (unlike Black men) are often coded as 'cute', although not intelligent, the resonance between longstanding narratives about the barbarianism and savagery of childhood (Gagen 2007) and Black masculinity help to account for contrary findings. Phoenix and Frosh (2001, 33), for instance, highlight the way 11-14-year-old White boys in a London-based study depicted Black boys as being both admirable for their perceived closeness to hegemonic masculinity<sup>4</sup> and feared for the same reason: raced inflections of hegemonic masculinity constituted Black boys as being too 'hard' or having a 'predilection for violence'. Similarly, Williams (1996, 817) recounts the way in which White children refused to play with her two-year-old Black son calling him 'scary', arguing powerfully that 'black men's social lot is made far grimmer for having been used as the emblem for all that is dangerous in the world'.

Indeed, such racialized notions of the monstrous are present in contemporary stories, rhymes, games, and children's media and have become the implicit and often unquestioned racialized structures of Whiteness through which Black male bodies are viewed (Yancy 2005). A number of explanations are offered for the long-standing racialization of the monstrous, and Black masculinity in particular. Braidotti (1999, 293) contends such racialization is 'structurally necessary' to maintaining 'dominant view[s] of subjectivity'. The boundaries of 'normal' humanity are maintained through comparison to what they are not: human monsters. Similarly, Frantz Fanon argued that such racialization serves the needs of those positioned as White allowing them to 'use Blacks to symbolize the evil part of themselves, which can then be disowned, and placed onto a distant figure' (Joan W. Howarth 1997, 104). Beyond the symbolic and psycho-social, the racialization of the monstrous is argued to be rooted in deeply material conditions, used to justify colonial expansionism and the retrenchment of the welfare state. 'Black males,' argues Stewart (1994, 40), 'are portrayed as the equivalent of Frankenstein's monsters created by permissive social policies.'

## Generating data

The data discussed in this paper comes from an 18-month ethnographic study investigating imaginative play about death and violence – including about monsters – and the ways in which inequitable social relations are renewed, reworked, and even transformed in such

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<sup>4</sup> Phoenix and Frosh (2001, 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.

activity. The study took place at Westside Nursery,<sup>5</sup> a government setting based in a low-income neighbourhood in London. There were 40 part-time and between 30-40 full-time children enrolled in the setting at any one time during the study. They ranged from 2-4 years old; spoke over 15 major home languages; and came from diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural communities. All children in the setting received a national entitlement for part-time education, and the 30-40 children in full-day care received various forms of government funding due to 'hardship'. A diverse group of 17 women formed the primary educational team in the setting.

The research involved being at the setting one day a week as a semi-participant observer, joining as a co-player with children (and adults) when invited. This researcher positioning has been described elsewhere as 'least-educator' and involved on-going reflection upon the way that social relations are not only 'racialized' but also 'generated' (Alanen 2011) whilst attempting to be situated 'outside of the *institutionalised responsibilities and authority* embedded in an educator role' (Albon and Rosen 2014, 38). Notes were taken either during or just immediately after observing a session and these 'scribbles' – with all the omissions and imprecisions this term implies (Jones et al. 2010) – were turned into longer fieldnotes at the end of each day. On some days, observations were video recorded and transcribed in an effort to generate data which allowed for analysis of aural and visual data involved in embodied interactions. The data discussed in this article also comes from formal and informal interviews with children and adults.

## Playing at the monstrous

The claim which will be developed in this paper is that not only do ludic characters and actions become, on occasion, connected to players' non-ludic personhood but they become 'fixed' on particular bodies while becoming mobile resources for others, ultimately serving to reinforce inequalities. In making this argument, the discussion will focus primarily on responses to four boys' monster play at Westside Nursery. These are not the only children who engaged in such play; nor was this the only type of activity, ludic or otherwise, that these boys were involved in. These four boys and their monster play are the focus of this article because, as the present section will outline, they occupied a significant place in educators' (and children's) narratives and because – unlike many children in the setting – they all enacted monster characters. This makes distinctions in the ways the monstrous was attached to the boys beyond play worlds more apparent.

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<sup>5</sup> All names of people and places used in this article are pseudonyms.

The first point to note is the differences in the way that the four boys were racialized within the setting. In keeping with statutory guidance, Westside Nursery collected data from parents about pupil ethnicity using government provided categories (DCSF 2008; DfE 2012). Paul and Ian were categorised as 'White British', Peter as 'Black Caribbean', and Yousef as 'Any other Black background'. All four boys, according to official documentation, spoke English at home; although, the educators also noted that Yousef, who had immigrated from North Africa, primarily spoke Arabic at home. In 'working with' categories of 'race', the point here is to provide a sense of the ways in which government policy and setting practice served to construct and operate within certain parameters of 'race'. While beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to note that such approaches to ethnicity function so as to reify the categories, mask the heterogeneity of ethnic 'communities' and – as Bradbury (2011) notes when used in relation to calculating whether settings have 'added value' to students – encourages the view that differential capabilities are fundamentally rooted in ethnicity. All four boys attended the setting for a full day, which at Westside Nursery was indicative of some type of family 'hardship'. Paul, Peter and Yousef received 'free school meals', an indicator of poverty in the UK and one that is often used as a proxy for social class (Gilborn and Mirza 2000). Despite this, educators commented on a number of occasions that Paul and Ian were 'relatively less deprived' than most of the other children in the setting, indicating that they were also classed differently by educators. These categorisations become important when considering the ways in which Ian and Paul's play was referenced by the educators in comparison to educator's language and practices associated with Peter and Yousef's play, which will be taken up below.

All four boys attended the setting throughout the course of the ethnography. At the end of the study, they were amongst those 4-year-olds who transitioned to compulsory schooling. They often played together or nearby each other in the outdoor space of the setting. Peter and Paul selected each other as preferred play partners during interviews and spent much of the unstructured time at Westside Nursery together. Yousef did not play consistently with a particular group, but he did occasionally play with the other three. In an interview, Paul indicated that Yousef was one of the children he enjoyed playing with. Ian played with all three on occasion, but he engaged with another group on a more regular basis and was named only by Peter as a preferred play partner in an interview. Although, Yousef often checked in with Ian to ask and ascertain that they were 'still friends' at which point Ian often responded: 'Of course we're friends'.

All four boys often engaged in imaginative play involving the monstrous. Indeed, marauding zombies, fire-breathing dragons and monsters that ate the boiled heads of humans were frequent tropes in the ludic activity at Westside Nursery. In some cases, monsters were

imagined creatures represented by little more than a rustle in the leaves or a collective point upwards towards an illusory monstrous figure. The players encountered, battled, or attempted to escape from these fantastical creatures using careful strategy or physical prowess. In other cases, a child or group of children would become the monster. Although such roles were not widely taken up, Ian, Paul, Peter and Yousef often did become monstrous characters and were then involved in chasing, 'attacking', and generally attempting to 'get' others. Being a monster often involved making non-verbal sounds including grunts, squeals, and growls; distorted facial expressions and embodiments; and 'violent' movements and even physical interactions, all of which were consistent with the monstrous characters.

Sometimes, physical interaction was clearly ludic, often referred to as 'rough and tumble' in the play literature (Pellegrini 2006) and characterised by laughter and a 'play face'; self-handicapping; and, the absence of intent to hurt co-players (e.g. Reed and Brown 2000). This was especially the case with Ian. His inhabiting of monstrous characters tended to be more physically restrained than the other three boys, with touch either clearly pantomimed or gentle when used with others. On occasion, these forms of physicality were employed by Paul, Peter, and Yousef, where sounds and loosely choreographed movements were used to indicate their monstrous character's hostility. At other times, there certainly did not seem to be such a clear bifurcation between thematic and actual aggression for either observers or child as the following fieldnote 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 into a ruthless character. Did he imagine that Carl was the enemy we had been searching for? Was this an invitation to Carl to join the ludic activity? Was he using his ludic character as a way to justify his treatment of Carl in the non-ludic space? Was he even 'in character' at all?*

The point here is certainly not to condone intimidation, physical aggression, or the colonisation of space or bodies which seem evident in this fieldnote – embodied aspects of imaginative play which act as '...a potent signifier of gender' and implicated in understandings of what 'bodies can and should do to reflect their positioning as 'masculine'' (Browne 2004, 90). Nor is the point to determine whether or not this was an example of

rough and tumble play – an ultimately unattainable goal given the impossibility of ever fully knowing and articulating intentions as well as the slippery nature of meanings and ambiguity of play itself (Sutton-Smith 1997). For the purposes of this article, the main point is to indicate that Paul, as well as the others, cited violence in their play and, notably, there were not consistent and continuous qualitative differences in Paul, Peter or Yousef's use of monstrous physical aggression in the ludic activity – a point which will be picked up later in the paper.

As a space in which players 'take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently to build it anew' (Henricks 2006, 185), ludic activity is both complex and often contradictory. Monstrous characters were not only used to enact aggression (whatever its ludic or quotidian status) but were used as forms of innovation. Ian, for instance, was a scary monster growling loudly and yelling at others '*I'm going to get you!*' as he chased them across the outdoor space. Upon catching his first 'victim', he promptly stopped and wrapped his arms around the other player explaining: '*All I wanted was a hug.*' In another example, Peter extended a play narrative using the ludic embodiment of a monstrous character to disrupt increasingly invasive incursions on his body:

*Peter dropped to the ground, his arms and legs spread eagle, eyes closed, and head hanging limply to the side. 'He died!' Abasi said as he and Paul began to 'heal' Peter by giving him shots in his bum, followed by further poking and prodding which became increasingly forceful. Peter lay still allowing the bodily intrusions to continue. After some time, he arose and began chasing the others – now in character as a Zombie with his body bent close to the ground, eyes partially closed, and arms out – all the while emitting low growls. The healers squealed with delight and ran for their lives.*

A final note to make is that all four boys embodied other characters within imaginative play at Westside Nursery, ranging from humans engaged in more socio-dramatic scenes, such as family picnics, to more fantastical embodiments of kittens, monkeys, astronauts and rainbows. They also played characters engaged in life and death struggles against monsters – both imagined and those enacted by others. On occasion these characters were some version of a superhero and on others they were undeclared, relying on their wits and human skills to deal with the monstrous. On one such occasion Peter and Ian joined with others to stop an enormous and insatiable (imaginary) monster who not only existentially threatened the fish population, which it was devouring, but the players themselves. Peter, Ian and a small group of other players gathered more children to help in the battle against the voracious beast, finally succeeding in turning the monster into babies which could be safely

imprisoned. On another occasion, Paul and Yousef hid in the bamboo from a marauding monster, finally escaping to fly on their rapidly built space ship to outer space.

## Inscriptions of the monstrous

The previous section highlighted the complexities of Ian, Paul, Peter and Yousef's ludic activity about the monstrous, highlighting the ways in which all the boys used monster play to engage in both collaborative and exclusionary activity, innovate within play narratives, and participate in ambiguous embodied interactions. The point in many ways was to stress that although there were differences between the four, none of them could be singularly linked to a particular enactment of the monstrous. 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'. By way of example, Dhurata commented in an interview: 'Ian has a sense of imagination way above the others', noting the way he would go into his 'changing room' to become different monstrous characters. Tashelle, another educator, commented: 'Paul has an amazing imagination in role play. He's the 'overseer'. He assigns roles. Takes play to another level. He has a vivid imagination and makes play exciting. His other friends play at a younger level.' Both Ian and Paul were mentioned numerous times in a group interview, with educators commending their 'skills' in using play characters for a variety of purposes including 'offering possibilities' or acting as a 'voice of reason' when conflicts occurred. They discussed a time when Paul shifted his monkey character from a monstrous *Planet of the Apes* character to become a father monkey calling his baby monkeys home when the other apes became rough. Whilst Ian and Paul certainly demonstrated great imagination, what is noteworthy is the way imaginative characters – including the monstrous – functioned in the educators' discourse as a transformable resource which Ian and Paul were able to 'put on' to develop ludic worlds and resolve disputes amongst others.

By way of contrast, both Peter and Yousef were often singled out by many of the educators as not knowing when to 'stop' in ludic activity, claiming that they were 'dangerous' and not able to 'contain' themselves. Because play about the monstrous was generally characterised as 'frenzied', 'wild', 'scary' and 'aggressive', Peter and Yousef's ascribed lack of containment was noted as a particular concern in monster play. A number of educators voiced concerns that Peter and Yousef would scare others when they were monsters in their play. For instance, Pansy, one of the educators, commented: 'Sometimes I just worry. I really don't

want other children to be upset. Like when Peter was that monster last week, he was really scary.’ During the ethnography, similar claims were never made in relation to Ian and Paul’s enactment of monstrous characters despite – as shown above – Paul’s use of monstrous characters in a way which was conceivably scary for Carl.

A number of the educators also linked Peter and Yousef’s monstrous characters to their non-ludic selves. Pansy commented in an interview: ‘After he’s been doing this play, Peter always tests boundaries’, in effect reiterating the characterisation of their monstrous play as ‘uncontained’ in ways which moved into the non-ludic realm. In the case of Yousef, his decision to enact monstrous characters was rooted in essentialised non-play characteristics, with Dhurata remarking: ‘Yousef is an aggressor and mean’. When discussed in reference to stories involving Peter and Yousef, characterisations of monstrous play became more specific: no longer just ‘wild’, one educator elicited laughter from others by commenting, ‘It’s gang culture already’. 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 ascriptions: ‘When something happens between the children, it is often Yousef who gets blamed’. At no point during the study, however, did any educator indicate that either Peter or Yousef have active imaginations or ‘offer possibilities’ for extending and innovating play through their use of monstrous (or other) characters, despite the examples above where they did just that.

The purpose is to highlight the way in which similar ludic activity was interpreted, coded, and valued differentially by educators, and specifically the ways in which Peter and Yousef’s non-ludic personhood was discursively linked to the monstrous characters they (on occasion) enacted in play. These linkages were implicit, for instance in the way that similar language was used in reference to Peter and Yousef beyond the play and when talking about monstrous characters within the play. Linkages were also more explicit: characteristics ascribed to Peter and Yousef were used to explain their take-up of monstrous characters or their ludic characters were seen to be aspects of their essentialised, quotidian selves.

These inscriptions were not only made by educators, but by some of the children as well:

*Gerome and I were talking about ‘baddie’ characters – often used synonymously by the children for monstrous characters – 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 responded with a tautology: ‘Because he’s going to go to jail.’*

*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.*

It is uncertain whether the characterisation of Peter (and Yousef) as 'scary' by Cecilia and other children preceded similar comments made by educators or whether children's stated fears and adults' concern they would be scared were mutually reinforcing. Of primary importance here, however, was that in this later fieldnote, Peter's monstrous character (the Hulk) was effectively mapped on to his personhood in the quotidian.

Likewise, even when Yousef was dressed as a Superhero, as he often was, many children 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!' Jumping down and yelling, 'Spiderman!', Ajay set off in search of Yousef with the others following.*

*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.*

The activity in this example 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 Superhero-cum-monster in the narrative. Despite noting that the play actions were consistent with the narrative and that the play was restarted at least three times by the other players, indicating an on-going interest in being a part of it however ambivalent this desire was, as an observer

I found it difficult to watch. It is possible to suggest then that part of the way Yousef was characterised in the setting (*'mean'* and *'aggressive'*) related to the way actions such as this violated expectations of children and educators in the setting as to 'appropriate' uses of physicality.

Whilst it is likely that this partially explains the reasons the 'monstrous' characterisations of 'lack of control', 'violence' and 'frenzy' were connected to Yousef, such individualised explanations are insufficient given that rough physical play was not uncommon in the setting. Certainly, in this example Ajay responded with an act which caused pain for Yousef. The above example certainly warrants interrogation not only about safety in ludic activity but also about the particular constructions of masculinity operating in the setting. At this stage, the primary focus is consideration of why 'monstrous' characteristics came to be associated primarily with Yousef (and Peter). In this example Adriana removed Yousef, not any of the others, from the play, as if assuming that he was both the cause of and the danger in the situation.

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, however, 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 very least in this moment. They explicitly identified him as a 'monster' and set the narrative stage where he was positioned as an excluded enemy, from whom they sought to evade capture. Indeed, during the course of the ethnography, Yousef and Peter were the only children who were declared by others to be the 'monster'. When other children did take up these types of characters, it was generally self-proclaimed. This contrast is suggestive of the way that the monstrous was 'fixed' on Yousef (and Peter) beyond the ludic world in a way which informed character assignment practices. Notwithstanding the roughness of the play, Walid, Ajay, and Dalmar continued to engage with Yousef, inciting 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 accepting such a characterisation was viewed as the cost of being able to engage with the others and maintain the 'fragile' interactive space of play (Corsaro 1985).

The suggestion here is that there was a self-reinforcing circularity in operation. Yousef and Peter were ascribed by others with 'monstrous' characteristics. In the example of Yousef, this informed the types of roles he was able to take up in order to remain in the play interaction. In the examples of Peter, educators noted concerns about his ability to engage in

play, particularly involving themes of death and violence, because he was seen to be, *in essence*, lacking in restraint and even 'wild'. In becoming a monstrous character, players would often act in ways which may be associated with the 'primitive', irrational, or savage. These are manifestations which would be expected in a narrative about monstrous characters; indeed they are often present in the horror genre of film. In effect, the narrative characteristics of monstrous play may have an (unintended) consequence of confirming and deepening the prior inscriptions of untrammelled hostility, savagery and lack of control. For instance, in their informal conversations and interviews, educators focused on Peter's monstrous enactments, over and above all other playful embodiments. These certainly did cite and involve insatiability and aggression, albeit that its status was often ambiguous; however, Peter's innovations and imaginative interventions were rendered invisible relative to Ian and Paul's. Yousef's commitment to the role of Superhero-cum-monster discussed above 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 amongst the other child players and observing educator.

### **Monsters in play, monsters in the quotidian?**

Thus far, the discussion has demonstrated the way that attributes associated with the monstrous characters they played were consistently linked to Peter and Yousef's quotidian selves in the discourses and practices operating in the setting, but not to Paul and Ian, despite similarities in the boys' ludic activities. Much as in Diawara's (Kolbowski and Diawara 1998) commentary on *Pulp Fiction*, Ian and Paul – the two boys racialized as White – came to be seen as separate and separable from the monster characters they played while Peter and Yousef – the two racialized as Black – were seen to be coterminous with the monstrous characters they played. As a result, the monstrous play characters Peter and Yousef took up did not function as mobile resources applauded for their innovation or ability to 'move the play on', as they did in the case of Ian and Paul. Here I contend that, whilst not the only reason, monstrous characters became inscribed on Peter and Yousef on the basis of their resonances with historic and contemporary inequalities (Skeggs 2004), specifically constructions of Black, working class masculinity.

To begin with some ground clearing: the suggestion here is not the children's monster play was about racialized themes, or that it was not for that matter. Nor is the claim that monsters would have been explicitly linked by people at this setting to 'race' even had they been asked directly. However, the differing interpretations of and responses to monster play

prompt consideration: how can the contrasting relationship posited between differentially-racialized boys and monstrous characters be explained? I suggest that the monster characters 'stuck' to Peter and Yousef because of the resonances and interpenetrations between racialized monsters which, as described above, have a historical persistence and contemporary purchase; the racialized bodies of Peter and Yousef; and the monster characters they embodied in play. Whether or not the play took up racialized themes, the interaction between these three aspects can help to explain why the ludic monsters were fixed to Peter and Yousef, in contrast to Ian and Paul.

The data suggests that this was a mutually reinforcing interaction. The wide availability of monsters as racially coded tropes possibly informed character assignment practices, such as times when children indicated that Peter and Yousef should play monstrous characters. Referred to as 'category maintenance work', children are often rebuffed or excluded because they play at characters which are seemingly in opposition to their bodily markers and likewise assigned characters which are seen to conform to their bodily markers (Davies 1989). At the same time, in playing at monstrous characters and embodying aggressive, terrifying, and wild characters, the already racialized 'visual register' (Alcoff 1999) served to connect Peter and Yousef's quotidian bodies to the characters and their monstrous attributes, effectively amplifying perceived connections between the monstrous and Black, working class masculinity.

Monstrous characters are often central to narratives in imaginative play and can contribute to deeply engaged and embodied investment in political-ethical explorations (Edmiston 2008), albeit that such exploration is not guaranteed and can become implicated in exclusionary, colonising and domineering relations beyond the ludic realm. These concerns notwithstanding, the point being made here is that embodiment of the monstrous also becomes problematic when these ludic characters come to be seen by other players and observers as representative of certain children's quotidian selves, with particularly negative consequences when such characterisations draw on and in turn reinforce inequalities. Systemic racism, combined with particular inscriptions of gender and class, meant the monstrous characters Peter and Yousef sometimes inhabited became increasingly fixed on these boys as *essential dispositions* beyond the play worlds.

This is not to suggest that children or early years educators in the setting were deliberately enacting, or even aware of, such racialized inscriptions. But as Gillborn (2005) points out, even something that may be well-intentioned – such as attending to the safety of children in an educator's care – can have racist outcomes. Indeed, the fixing of the monstrous as an essential disposition is certainly a misrepresentation, reinforcing as it does the assumption

that particular children or groups of racialized 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 or groups of children as 'problematic' or 'dangerous', distancing them from idealised notions of the innocent, 'productive' and playful learner in early years settings (Rogers and Lapping 2012). Crucially, where children are inscribed as inherently 'dangerous', childhood is only 'redeemable' through the actions of 'civilised' adults, including via disciplinary measures (Leavitt and Power 1997). In a similar manner, the conflation of aggression and delinquency with Black working class masculinity leads to efforts to control the lives of Black men and boys. What's more, the conflation of the monstrous with particular social groups sustains fundamentally reductive and one-dimensional views of childhood, gender, 'race', and class, ultimately obscuring the social processes whereby bodies are racialized.

## Conclusion

This paper began with Alcoff's (1999, 25) call to attend to the ways that racialized 'meanings are located on the body'. The argument herein has been that one way this happens is through the inscription of ludic characters on some children where the same characters become mobile resources for others. It has been argued that this happens in the interaction between the ways that bodies are racialized (and classed and gendered), the attributes and symbolism of ludic characters, and the concentration of complex historic and contemporary social relations of inequality. Whilst the paper has focused on the relationship between monstrous characters and reified assumptions about Black working class masculinity, the implications of the argument move beyond this specific focus. They suggest a need for further consideration of the ways in which ludic characters become inscribed on childhood bodies and serve to buttress 'race', class, gender and generational categorisations and the inequalities they are productive of.

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