Play as activism?
Early childhood and (inter)generational politics

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Abstract: Both young children and imaginative play are often considered to be fundamentally apolitical. Such views have been increasingly challenged, however, as both 'the political' and activism are being reconceptualised in more expansive ways. In seeking to critically build upon these efforts, I draw on ethnographic data generated in an early years setting in a super-diverse low-income community in London to highlight the space of imaginative play as a resonant site for investigations of the political. However, whether or not something is considered a 'political' matter is a political struggle in itself, and one that players may neither desire nor achieve. I make a case for both distinguishing between play and activism, and considering ways to foster connections between them. Imaginative play has the potential to enrich an intergenerational politics where adults and children engage together for a more just future.

Keywords: activism, childhood, generation, imaginative play, political theory, young children

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Referring to the ubiquitous image of 'the child' in political posters, historian Karen Dubinsky (2012, p. 8) suggests that: "Children appear, so that adults can act." Ruddick (2007) meanwhile worries about the possibility for neoconservative "ventriloquism" when adults claim to speak for the speechless foetus or child. What is most striking is that the affective force of 'the child' – as object for intervention or incitement to action – resonates across political lines. The 'young child' is a powerful trope, symbolising a bundle of adult anxieties, hopes, and attempts to control uncertain futures. Yet, the actual beings called young children in everyday parlance are largely understood and treated as being fundamentally apolitical. Their action is represented as learning, development, and newness to the world or, in less generous accounts, as pathology and manipulation.

In response, a small body of scholarship and practice has arisen, countering the relegation of early childhood in popular discourse and social theory to a 'private' and sequestered realm away from 'the political'. This literature has a dual concern: on the one hand attending to the politics of early childhood (Moss, 2007) and, on the other, considering the politics of young children. In this latter approach, 'the political' is seen to be far more than formal structures of governance and rational, verbal acts – conceptualisations which exclude very young humans on both developmental and social grounds (Oswell, 2009). Instead, these approaches draw on more expansive ways of understanding what is political. They highlight the diversity of spaces where contestations take place over power, injustice, and the ways in which people seek to define and meet their needs (Brown, 2002; Fraser, 1990). Rather than assuming *a priori* which sites, modes, and speech count as political, Kallio and Häkli (2011) argue that we should begin by looking at children's experiences and lived worlds with these understandings in mind. The turn to children's politics has also prompted examination of young people's activism, with Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss (2016) staging an "(im)possible conversation" across these categories and pointing to a view of activism as both contesting the status quo and prefiguring new social relations, and likewise both the potential for action and action itself.

In the main, efforts to rethink the political in light of insights gleaned from research about children's lives do not intersect with the large body of cross-disciplinary scholarship about children's imaginative play. This increasingly focuses on play in developmental and educational terms, grounded in what Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to as a rhetoric of 'play as

progress'. There is, however, a small, but significant, body of work which draws attention to the relationship between play, subjectivities, and social inequities (e.g. see discussion in Rosen, 2016). Notwithstanding that it focuses more on *social* than *political* subjectivities and agency (Kallio & Häkli, 2011), insights therein provide the basis for rethinking the relationship between play and the political, and even play and activism, given play's possibility for imagining and enacting new ways of being (Bosco, 2010; Lester, 2011).

Bringing together these bodies of literature on play, politics, and childhood prompts the questions: When can play be considered political? If we accept that there is a potential for political agency to be enacted in and through imaginative play, can this be understood as a form of activism? What are the promises and risks of such conceptual moves? In taking up these questions in the discussion which follows, I advance three main arguments. Drawing on ethnographic data, I begin by highlighting imaginative play as a resonant site for investigations of the political. Then, I suggest that whether or not something is considered a 'political' matter, rather than intimate or educational for example, is a political struggle in itself, and one that players may neither desire nor achieve. Finally, I consider these points in light of broader efforts in the social sciences to rethink the boundaries of activism arguing that it is important to both distinguish, and consider ways to foster the connections, between play and activism.

Play and the political

By way of entry into these arguments, I offer the story of a quest to stop an insatiable monster. I was about one year into an ethnographic study[1] at Westside Nursery, based in a super-diverse low-income community in London, UK, when Peter, a charismatic – and contentious – pre-schooler, waved me over. Cecilia also responded to his wave, but Peter pushed her and yelled: "No! This is just for boys!" Cecilia pushed back, and the tension

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[1] This "critical moment" happened during an 18-month ethnographic study investigating socio-dramatic and fantastical play about themes of imaginary death and pretend physical violence. I spent one day a week at Westside Nursery as a semi-participant observer, joining as a co-player when invited and taking field notes either during or just immediately after observing a session. 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. I also conducted formal and informal ethnographic interviews with children and adults. Thematic coding was complemented by in-depth analysis of 'critical moments' such as the one in this article. Critical moments are not chosen because they are repeated events: even if a phenomena is observed only once it can still be interrogated in relation to the conditions of its production and the effects of its existence (Sayer, 2000). Analytically, the use of critical moments which either "disturb or jar" or "are so mundane that we may miss their presence" allows for analysis of "entrenched assumptions" (Albon & Rosen, 2014, p. 6).

escalated, a full-blown physical fight about to erupt. Standing next to me and looking on, Kaltrina – a fellow pre-schooler – shouted at the two: "The monster! Come over!" The fight between Peter and Cecilia stopped as quickly as it had begun and they ran with the others who had joined us to hide from the 'monster'. Sabir wiped his brow and Cecilia breathed rapidly as Kenza whispered: "We have to trap the monster in there." She pointed to a set of fenced-in stairs. 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 strategies. "Let's cut his head off with the sword!" "Let's put ropes across the top so he can't get out." "We need more children to help us," Kenza pronounced authoritatively. "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. The assembled group of nine players gathered around Kaltrina as she insisted: "OK. We need many plans," moving her hands up and down as if to show the magnitude of tactics necessary to stop the voracious beast.

This imaginative activity was not at all unusual at Westside Nursery where vampires, beasts, and other horrific creatures roamed the outdoor space with impunity during the parts of the daily schedule which were organised into 'free play' blocks. To call this imaginative play, however, is not to indicate how such activity was understood by the participants, nor is it intended in any way to minimise its importance. Play is not just 'fun and games' but is very 'real' in experience and effect, and as I will go on to suggest, intricately bound up with questions of the political, or indeed the political economy.

As has been well-documented, play has become a site of big business (Cook, 2014; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2001), ranging from commercial products to specially designed spaces and activities. The play described above was no different. We hid from the insatiable monster behind a wall of blocks purchased from Community Playthings, a multi-million-dollar corporation with a global "reach" expanding across seven world regions. The themes and characters in this and many other moments of imaginative play I observed involved narratives which drew on monster-saturated media directed at a market of child viewers. To give a sense of this scope, Disney's *Monsters Inc* film grossed US$590 million and the four *Shrek* Films grossed a total of US$2.9 billion (FindTheData, 2012).

Play is also one way that people orient and position themselves and others. Central preoccupations for players at Westside Nursery included who could play and who could not, as well as what each character could do and what they were unable or forbidden to do. Play,

then, is implicated in the formation of subjectivities and social relations (Rosen, 2016). Although such engagements are not always discussed in the academic literature in relation to political subjectivities, they certainly resonant with contemporary descriptions of 'the political' as sites where "injustice is possible" (Nakata, 2008, p. 19), where social relations are profoundly shaped by capital, and where power and value(s) are negotiated and contested (Brown, 2002). Peter's initial refusal to allow girls into play, for instance, reinforced gender binaries by using characteristics associated with dominant forms of masculinity – strength, agility, and physicality – as a basis for exclusion. More broadly, play is increasingly used to make distinctions between 'adults' and 'children', with certain playful activities consigned to childhood which were previously common across generational orders[2] (Aries, 1962). Indeed, play has become synonymous with an idealised childhood, such that young children, on an increasingly global basis, spend numerous hours engaged in activity which is, at very least, named as play.

In many cases, play has also become a site of surveillance and regulation. Framed as a way to promote progress and development it has become "an almost hallowed concept for teachers of young children" (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993, p. 105). The point here is that young children's play in early childhood settings – including the violently-themed play about the insatiable monster – takes place within highly structured settings, largely designed and ordered by adults in order to achieve certain instrumental ends (Ailwood, 2003). Despite the terminology of 'free play', neoliberal pedagogies of play are primarily concerned with producing certain types of human capital: "school ready" learners and employment-ready future adults (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). At Westside Nursery, an exhaustive national reporting structure and ranking system created the conditions where educators watched, documented, and evaluated children's play based on prescriptive developmental milestones. When children were deemed to be "stuck" and unable to meet these teleological goals, educators also intervened to "move them on" (Rosen, 2015a).

Finally, play often surfaces complex ethical and political questions. Peter's initial rejection of "girls" raised political questions about possible ways to disrupt and challenge sexist practices. The story of the insatiable monster, devouring the fish for its own individual benefit, has

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[2] The term "generational order" refers to "a system of social ordering" which positions certain people as 'children' and others as 'adults' (Alanen, 2011, p. 161). Rather than reflecting a natural division, these categories are inherited and remade through human activity. Certain activities, behaviours, needs, and capacities become associated with each generational position, affecting possibilities for action.

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resonances with overtly political questions about private appropriation and accumulation. Indeed, the monstrous has often been used as a cultural trope to signify political concerns, including hyper-consumption, unbridled expansionism, and the destruction of non-renewable resources (McNally, 2011). What's more, the confrontation with the enormous, ravenous, and growing monster which not only existentially threatened the fish population but also the players themselves raised a series of questions about what sort of action is possible, ethical, and even necessary in the face of such horror. The players confronted questions about whether death or imprisonment would offer an effective and satisfactory response, as well as the relative benefits of individual and collective action.

It is for these reasons that I am arguing that play *may* be understood as a highly political space. It is also one in which players have the potential for political agency, understood here as "participation and engagement with discourses and taking action designed to change life situations (political, economic, social and cultural practices)" (Skelton, 2010, p. 147). Players in the monster tale 'engaged' with hegemonic discourses and inequitable social relations such as attempted gendered exclusions. They 'took action' against the greedy monster, albeit primarily within the cultural reality of play.

Play as a 'political' matter

Taking seriously Kallio and Häkli's (2011) suggestion that we start investigations of the political by attending to *how* something becomes political (or not), here I consider how investigations of play speak to this question. I argue that whilst play may certainly be understood as a politicised site, as noted above, whether or not this occurs is an empirical question.

This necessitates addressing what makes something 'political'. "A matter is 'political'," argues Fraser (1990, p. 205), "If it is contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range" of people. Fraser's point here is that beyond "official" structures of governance, there is a "discursive politics" and part of what happens in this space is contestation over whether a matter is one of official political concern rather than domestic, educational, or economic. Something is not essentially political in content but whether it is viewed as political is a matter of struggle itself. Extending this point, Kallio and Häkli (2011) contend that in some cases struggles to politicise a matter may move it from the 'private' into the official political where it becomes institutionalised.

Both these distinctions between the official and discursive political, and the emphasis on *how* something becomes political rather than *if* it is political, provide an important extension to my previous point that play can be understood as a site of the political. These distinctions suggest that there is a significant potential that the matter of play may be considered leisure or educational not only due to definitional differences. Whether play is considered political also relates to the relative degree of contestation about it and the themes it raises. Put slightly differently: a number of factors pose serious limits to the potential of young children's play in the contemporary moment being seriously considered as a site of the political.

To illustrate this point, it might be helpful to share a brief anecdote. I was recently discussing our website tagline "Researching and teaching the politics of children and childhood at UCL" with a senior childhood scholar. She commented: "I'm glad you put this on the site. I'm so tired of the focus on play in childhood studies rather than on important political issues." Such a statement might not be surprising coming from a political scientist largely concerned with the official politics of adults. But why might a knowledgeable and respected childhood scholar make such comments – particularly someone who has dedicated a great deal of her scholarly life to recognising children's contributions and working for their improved status and well-being?

Certainly, I think this academic was countering the relegation of children to the realm of play, and indeed the more widespread age-based segregation of young children into "islands" (Zeiher, 2003), separated into institutions and activities away from others in their communities. At the same time, however, such comments reflect and reproduce dominant Rousseaunian-inflected imaginaries of play as innocent, fun, and free – entirely Other to the political. Yet, as I have discussed above, the insatiable monster narrative makes short work of any such conceptualisations of childhood play. More pressingly, by dislocating the potential for play to have political import, such comments effectively set young children outside of the political given that this is how their activity is organised and understood on an increasingly global scale. This positions play, and the matters raised in playful activity, at the margins, not seen or heard as potentially political issues or acts to be contested "across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range" of people.

A second relevant factor here relates to players' uses of hidden spaces. Given the extent of adult control over when, where, and how children are expected to engage in early childhood settings, it is not unsurprising that many studies have documented the ways in which children

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find or make hidden spaces to play away from adult surveillance and intervention (Albon & Rosen, 2014; Skanfors, Lofdahl, & Hagglund, 2009). Children may make use of the physical affordances of spaces which limit the presence of larger (typically adult) bodies. They may take play to spaces where adult sight lines are restricted or engage in mobile play that adults are not able to follow. Indeed, much of the monster saga described above took place in a hidden space behind a large tree, off to the side of the outdoor space with very limited sight-lines from other parts of the nursery. When taken into the open, the play moved rapidly across the boundaries of the specific spaces which adult staff members were placed and required to monitor. The point here is that such use of hidden space limits the range of people amongst whom contestations can take place, restricting the extent to which play and the concerns explored within it can become politicised. My intention here is not to hold children responsible for being deemed inherently apolitical, but to note that whether play and its themes become a political matter or not is achieved through struggle, and processes of politicisation, and this may be neither desired nor achieved by child players.

Play as activism?

So far, I have argued that play is a relevant site for investigation of the political. I have tempered my claims by suggesting that the historical location, context, and visibility of play effect if and how it becomes politicised and a site where political agency is exercised. Invoking political agency moves the discussion into the terrain of social change, social action, and even activism, and it is to this that I now turn. I consider whether young children's potential for political agency in and through imaginative play can be understood as a form of activism, as well as the promises and risks of such a conceptual move. In what follows, I do not deny the possibility that imaginative play can be part of, or involved in, activist efforts, but I contend that there are dangers to conflating play and activism. I tread a cautious path between denying play a space within/as activism and broadening definitions of activism to include everything and anything.

This intervention speaks with, but also against, accounts critical of the ways in which 'activism', which broadly speaking can be understood as collective efforts at transformation actualised through political agency (Nolas et al., 2016), has been reduced to the spectacular, the programmatic, the national or global; separated from people's quotidian lives; and tied to self-aware intentionality. Indeed, there have been various attempts to question the boundaries between activism and the everyday, opening up the tenor and type of action typically

considered activist by both social scientists and participants in social movements (Martin, Hanson, & Fontaine, 2007). This scholarship draws attention to the "cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative" practices of a minor politics or activism (Rose, 1999, p. 280). To give one such example, Horton and Kraftl (2009) argue that stated intentions and sentiments for change, expressed in terms of 'I should do X in order to achieve Y', but not necessarily combined with action, can be understood as "flickering" activist dispositions and "implicit activism". They consider responses of parents to the threatened closure of a neighbourhood Children's Centre which take this projective, but not necessarily actualised form of action. They argue that "everyday, affective bonds and acts ultimately constituted *politicised activism* and commitments" (my italics, Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p. 15).

Without doubt, there is a need to question on both epistemological and political grounds the limitations of current doxa which offer impoverished characterisations of activism (Bobel, 2007). By focusing only on large-scale mobilisations, iconised by the highly visible solitary hero or charismatic leader, the arduous work of building and nurturing activism is obscured. This can limit understandings of how political movements are sustained emotionally and practically. Such concerns are particularly urgent when activism may feel impossible, futile, or risky, which are symptomatic of the pervasive sense that 'there is no alternative', either viable or imaginable, to capitalism and its exploitative social relations (Fisher, 2009). Further, as feminist scholarship has pointed out, the cooking, caring, and emotional labour – including relationship building and the cultivation of dissenting subjectivities – which are so central to activist efforts continue to be deeply gendered (Martin et al., 2007).

More expansive notions raise a question as to whether play can be seen as a form of activism where players may "seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action" (Rose, 1999, p. 280). Such reworkings are, for example, evident in Cecilia's refusal to be excluded from the physically active and heroic play on the basis of spuriously gendered assertions. Similar instances were apparent throughout the ethnography such as a time when children and an adult-educator playfully swapped institutional roles, as a succession of children usurped the 'teacher's chair' and commanded others in a way that simultaneously claimed, and poked fun at, institutional authority. In many ways, the characteristics of play would seem to not only lend themselves to such reworking but can be understood *as* fundamentally transformative interjections in the world. Imaginative play, as Henricks (2006) puts it, involves pulling apart and building the world anew. Players operate in the subjunctive mode: 'as if' they were someone else or 'what if' the world was otherwise. Play makes it possible to

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refuse accepted meanings and create new ones: as in the critical moment which began this article, a fence can become a prison, the wind can become a greedy monster, and antagonisms between individual children can be reshaped into a collective endeavour. In play, participants experiment with varying ways of being and acting, and can overturn the status quo, at least within the confines of the play: small bodies and children – who are subordinated and regulated in ways justified by their positioning as children – became more powerful than an enormous, domineering and monstrous enemy. In other moments, child players used the trope of dying and death in a variety of ways including, as I have argued elsewhere, as a way to provoke caring touch *from other children* (Rosen, 2015c). The recognition that players can make different worlds in play is suggestive of the social constitution of our quotidian lives, and therefore its possible reconstitution (Katz, 2004). Indeed, Katz (2004, p. 253) explains that having "a vision of what else could be" is central to any radical politics.

Building on such understandings, Bosco (2010, pp. 385-386) argues that children's play and "playful becoming" should be considered as activism in so far as it "contributes, both directly and indirectly, to political and social change" and allows for "experiment[ation] with political relations". Lester (2011) puts forward a similar argument. Although he does not use the term activist, it is implied. Lester (2011, p. 13) contends that children's play "can be seen as full (*political*) participation" and that play is necessarily an exercise of children's "collective agency to appropriate available times/space for their desires." He goes on to suggest that by offering moments of hope and providing children with the opportunity to control aspects of their own lives, playing "becomes a political and ethical movement for both adults and children" (Lester, 2011, p. 21).

My concern here is that collapsing emotional labour, sentiments for change, individual "acts of defiance" (Bobel, 2007), or indeed imaginative play into activism – regardless of intent or actual enactment – does a disservice to efforts aimed at understanding and working towards social, political, and economic transformation. I take intent to be an essential defining feature of activism, albeit that the form of activity could just as easily be cooking for a group meeting or speaking at a demonstration and need not be identified by participants as activism at all. Conflating play and activism also limits the ability to evaluate political impact (both intended and not) and efficacy (in terms of both practical changes and formation of new alliances or solidarities) of various forms of action. It also limits the development of movements which might bring about social change. Histories of worker and civil rights struggles, as well as those against slavery and imperialism, point to the 'efficacy' and necessity of collective

movements in the face of injustice, domination, and exploitation, albeit that there are diverse ways of understanding collectivities.

My apprehensions take a particular form in relation to claims that play is a space of activism. To acknowledge play as a site for considering the political, and to point to the possibility of contestation of the status quo around, or via play, is not the same thing as arguing that this will *necessarily* happen. Play also reproduces and amplifies injurious social relations (Rosen, 2016). While Peter's initial exclusion of girls was challenged in the monster saga above, there were many other instances at Westside Nursery where ascriptions of gender, 'race', ability, and class were used to police the boundaries around play groups, assign play characters, and imagine ludic worlds. For instance, girls were denied roles as superheroes, while boys racialized as Black were told they could only be the troubled character of "Black Spiderman", effectively re-constituting the iconic saviour role as one of privileged White masculinity. Play often reinforced hegemonic practices in their narratives: for instance, play stories revolved around 'mothers' cooking, caring, and cleaning for others reflecting traditional gendered divisions of labour or included shopping, buying, and consuming as ways to build up stores of material possessions (both symbolic and imaginary) as the basis for achieving power and social status. Play in these instances bypasses debates over values, power, and injustices. Further, there is no guarantee that new imaginings in play will necessarily become everyday ways of being and living. The point I am making here is that it is important not to essentialise play as fundamentally change-oriented and activist despite its contestive and subjunctive characteristics.

Moves towards more expansive notions of activism are important in that they connect the deeply intimate to the political. However, even Rose (1999, p. 280), in forwarding "minor politics" as activism, pays significant attention to the ways "small reworkings" join up "with a whole series of other circuits and cause them to fluctuate, waver and reconfigure in wholly unexpected ways". Even if political agency exercised in the "cramped spaces" of play can combine into something more, the opposite is just as likely. By collapsing play into activism we limit our theoretical resources for considering why such connections do or do not happen. One question to ask then is: what is it about the characteristics of (young children's) playful activity which might constrain/enable such wider reconfigurations? What conditions allow, and what preclude, new commonalities to be forged through play? To simply replace the programmatic and spectacular with the intimate and tentative is effectively a reversal of the feminist slogan "the personal is political". It has risky implications given the exploitative

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continuity of inequities which extend beyond the local. Although the monster saga was a particular and localised instantiation of gendered exclusions and their contestation, it bears marked similarity to narratives in other nursery settings. Further, the ongoing ethnography suggests it did not cause more than very momentary flicker beyond this particular moment nor was there any indication that such action was motivated by, or intended to challenge, hegemonic formations of gender or relations of exploitation.

The place of play in (inter)generational activism

In this article, I suggest that play is a resonant site for investigations of the political but argue that whether play and its themes become political matters is both an empirical question and a matter of struggle itself. I contend that the possibility of exercising political agency within and around play is different than suggesting play is a space of activism. Crucially, however, I have rejected developmental arguments which render young children, and their imaginative play, essentially outside the realm of political contestation as well as concurring with arguments that the sites and activities of politics, and indeed activism, cannot be determined *a priori*. Instead, my emphasis on distinguishing between play and activism has focused on attending to the ways in which political change occurs and characterising activism as fundamentally bound up with concerns of social, political and economic transformation.

Nevertheless, these points of distinction do not mark an incommensurability between play and activism, and in these concluding comments, I highlight the value of fostering connections between them for (inter)generational activism. In bracketing the 'inter' of intergenerational, I seek to keep two slightly different points in view. First, this construction nods to the possibility of thinking 'intergenerationally' about activism, moving political contestation out of an adult-only realm and stressing the importance of social memories across generations in forging political solidarities (Nolas et al., 2016). Second, I highlight the necessity of contesting generational orders which reify a sharp binary between childhood and adulthood; essentialise 'the child', ascribing her/him with, often deficit, characteristics, normative activities such as the contemporary bourgeois conflation of play and childhood, and marginal social status; and lead to the subordination of children, inter alia, as a generational group.

Taking such an (inter)generational approach by attending to the politics of and in children's play can contribute to more inclusive and diverse communities committed to social justice. Transformations will be fundamentally limited if almost one third of the world's population, those under 18,[3] are denied the possibility of participation in explicit action for change. In part, then, I am suggesting the importance of learning to hear, and to be "answerable" (Rosen, 2015b), to both the interventions and silences of young children's play in deliberations over the political and activism. Put simply: play may be many things, but it is deserving of political attention.

While I have suggested that political issues of inequality, oppression, and exploitation generally need to be addressed through collective activism, such social action is largely motivated by what matters or comes to matter to people. Rational logic and dialogue are not the only, or even primary, motivations (Sayer, 2011). The characteristics of play mean that it is a significant arena for gaining insights into issues which matter or come to matter for participants. Perhaps more importantly, it offers a space for collectively exploring and building a sense of what matters 'to us'. As an easily ruptured space which necessarily requires that someone or something "responds in satisfying ways" (Henricks, 2006, p. 201) in order for it to continue, some element of play themes, partners, and/or processes must matter to players in order for play to be maintained. In the monster saga, it mattered to Cecilia and Kaltrina that they were not excluded. The existential survival of the children, and later the fish, became of crucial concern to the collective group of players. Maintaining the interactive play space mattered: children offered contradictory suggestions for stopping the monster but did not 'block' other interjections to the extent of collapsing the play space.

Play – and its affective, interactive, and subjunctive characteristics – can provide a counter-point to cynicism engendered in a world where actions seem futile or are co-opted before even being realised. There is *always* an alternative in play. As a slightly more liminal and less existentially fraught space, play allows for experimentation, creation, as well as imagining and enacting new ways of being and living. The monster saga prompted this group of children to find ways to come together in a common struggle against the monster. This enactment of a form of solidarity, albeit a contestable one, was different than many everyday

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[3] I am using this age distinction somewhat rhetorically. Age is neither the only way to understand the processes whereby some humans are made into children. As a growing "legal fetishism" (Vitterbo, 2012), age has, however, become a dominant way of defining childhood.

interactions in Westside Nursery, where these children were often at odds with each other. Verbal and physical fights, and efforts at being *individually* recognised and praised, were not uncommon. Building common cause is a critical challenge in activist movements: 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 fragmentation and intensifying global inequities.

In discussing these points, I have provided examples from the monster play. However, I have explicitly left open the matter of who players can be, hinting that there is an 'us' which moves beyond young children. If adults approach play within openness, rather than attempting to contain that which seems risky or recuperate it for developmental purposes, imaginative play has the potential to allow for those constituted as adults and children to *engage together* with the possibilities of a more just future. Before expanding, it is perhaps instructive to be clear what I am *not* saying here. This is not a point about educational theory or pedagogical practice per se. I am not advocating play as, yet another, forum in which adults might constitute themselves as teachers in relation to children, and intervene to socialise children into 'proper' roles of citizenship and 'correct' types of political activity. Here, however, I am seeking to destabilise play as something that young children do and in which adults might occasionally intervene, precisely because play allows for political dilemmas and strategies to be explored in slightly more liminal spaces. As a player in the monster saga, the rapid breathing, whispered voices, and expansive physical movements of players produced feelings in me of both fear in the face of the monster's voracious appropriations and subjugating acts, as well as a sense of strength (and admitted unease) in bodies coming together to stop the monster's destruction.[4]

Finally, children's historically-situated expertise as players can serve to destabilise adult-child power relations, an important counter balance to critiques of solidarity as conditional and paternalistic (Benson & Rosen, 2017, Forthcoming). This is not a naïve claim that play is immune to historically sedimented power relations. For example, adult-child play in this ethnography was often treated by educators as an opportunity to help students meet

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[4] The use of such emotive terms perhaps sounds unbelievable, and I myself was surprised by the force of my responses. However, if it is accepted that fiction and images can produce emotional investments and interpellations in adults, I would argue that it is only 'adultism' which makes children's play seem so inconsequential that it cannot produce such sentiments. It goes without saying, however, that these embodied emotions are not transparently knowable and are more than likely bound up with adult anxieties of childhood.

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nationally-determined learning goals. The historically specific constitution of the 'child as player' does, however, exemplify that the 'competent adult' and 'deficit child' is not a monolithic, a-historic, or static relation. Nevertheless, given the subordination of children broadly speaking, the proposal to engage in play inter-generationally is one which is well served by a consequentialist lens. Who speaks, influences, and acts in play; in what ways; and for whose benefit are central questions to be asked. I was compelled to wonder, for example, how important it was to maintain our common cause and how much my insistence on doing so might amplify adult dominance or muffle important debate about what is 'we' value.

Linking emotions and imagination to activism is not to discount the importance of rational deliberation, but to add to it. Political dilemmas that are opened up in ludic activity, as well as things identified as mattering to us, can continue to be explored both in future play and in other sites. Conversely, activism in turn can help shift the contours of play, including the exclusions, the hegemonic, and relations of domination which haunt such spaces.

Young children's play, then, is neither the same as, nor the antithesis to, activism. In offering a space where the world can be otherwise, play can perhaps simply be understood to share with activism the slogan: "Another world is possible." Imagining which worlds this might be, and how we might live and be in these worlds, is the subject of ongoing struggle, deep political-economic analysis, and creative explorations of the intergenerational 'matterings' of our lives.

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