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Dr. Seuss as a Vehicle: An Introduction

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The genesis of the symposium on which this issue is based, *Exploring Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss*,[1] arose after my colleague and co-convener Professor Tamara Belinfanti wrote an op-ed published on March 7, 2012 entitled *Corporations in a Lorax State*.[2] Among other things, Tamara wrote that *The Lorax*[3] provides an apt basis for suggesting businesses will be much better off over the long haul if they actively work to conserve and husband resources rather than focus on short-term profits. Almost immediately after reading the wonderful op-ed, I chatted with Tamara about it over lunch. From that conversation sprang the idea for the symposium—one devoted to using the amazing books of Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel to provoke discourse about the nature of civil society in the twenty-first century. The symposium drew a stunning array of legal, literary, and social critics from the academy and other institutions to think critically about the shape and hopes of contemporary society.

My initial exposure to the books of Dr. Seuss, like the experience of many, occurred after my wife, Elizabeth Langer, and I welcomed our now thirty-eight-year-old son Ben to the world. Some of the first books we read to him in the late 1970s were crazy rhyming tomes like *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*;[4] *Hop on Pop*;[5] and *Fox in Socks*.[6] Graduation to famous storybooks such as *Cat in the Hat*[7] and *Green Eggs and Ham*[8] began to open my eyes to the wonders of not only Seuss's verbal shenanigans, but also his intellectual and artistic genius. But it wasn't until we purchased and read *The Sneetches and Other Stories*[9] that I began to understand the full depth of his brilliance. We proceeded to devour Seuss books, filling up a bookshelf and delighting Ben, and later his brother Sam, with mind-boggling fantasy worlds and brilliantly conceived stories. These were books for children and adults alike—an extraordinarily rare characteristic for volumes culled from the juvenile shelves of bookstores and libraries.

For me, *The Sneetches* is one of the most brilliant children's stories ever written. I suspect many people have their own favorite Seuss tale, but *The Sneetches* gets my gold star. Published in 1961 during the civil rights movement and, some say, written as a tome against anti-Semitism, it tells the story of the beach-dwelling, gender-

1. 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 490 (2013–2014). Video recordings of the symposium, which took place on March 1, 2013 at New York Law School, are available at http://www.nylslawreview.com/dr-seuss-program/.

2. Tamara Belinfanti, *Corporations in a Lorax State*, Huffington Post (Mar. 7, 2012, 3:31 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamara-belinfanti/corporate-responsibility_b_1322136.html.

3. Dr. Seuss, The Lorax (1971).

4. Dr. Seuss, One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish (1960).

5. Dr. Seuss, Hop on Pop (1963).

6. Dr. Seuss, Fox in Socks (1965).

7. Dr. Seuss, The Cat in the Hat (1957).

8. Dr. Seuss, Green Eggs and Ham (1960).

9. Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches*, *in* The Sneetches and Other Stories (1961).

neutered Sneetches—some with stars on their bellies and some without. Those with were the elite; those without were, simply put, without. When the "fix-it-up chappie" Sylvester McMonkey McBean shows up with his machines to affix and then remove stars from the bellies of the Sneetches, they flock to pay his fees. Those without seek to join the elite for just three dollars, only to have McBean offer to remove stars from the previously elite bellies for ten dollars so they could retain their elevated status. The penultimate scene finds Sneetches lined up in an enormous figure-eight going in and out of McBean's machines, having stars repetitively affixed and removed—but only until their money runs out and they lose track of who was previously elite and who was not. The final scene—on the surface among the most romantic and hopeful in the history of children's literature—shows two Sneetches, one with a star and the other without, strolling hand-in-hand down the beach.

I still marvel at the deep complexities of this story. The first layer—and the one most accessible for children—presents a tale of hope for the day when the surface characteristics of our race, ethnicity, religion, and gender lose their power to define cultural status. But other layers add immeasurable richness to Seuss's storytelling tapestry. Among the many intriguing and sometimes disturbing aspects of the tale, three stand out for me: the pictorial representations of the Sneetches and McBean, the role of money in the plot, and the hopelessly romantic and, for me, ultimately deeply unsatisfying image of two hand-in-hand Sneetches on the beaches.

First, like many creatures in Seuss's other books, the Sneetches are pictured as genderless figures. They are also pictorially asexual, just as they are (at least at first glance) aracial, aethnic, and areligious. By the end of the story, mutual understanding and, presumably, love can cross traditional gender, racial, ethnic, and religious lines without hindrance on the beaches of the Sneetches. After McBean departs, these characters appear to be behind a veil of ignorance, as in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*,[10] a book first published a decade after *The Sneetches*. They don't know their heritage, they don't have class consciousness, and they have no money. They (and we) are asked by Seuss to start from scratch and work out their (and our) futures without knowing the heritage of their co-citizens. And if Rawls was right, they will do so with a deep consciousness about the needs of their fellow Sneetches.

But that hopeful, "post-racial" tale is deeply scarred by two factors: the physical appearance of Sylvester McMonkey McBean and the role money plays in the story. McBean is not a Sneetch. He looks very different—standing out like a sore thumb by

10. John Rawls, A Theory of Justice 11 (Harvard Univ. Press rev. ed. 1999). Rawls describes a hypothetical analytical starting point for developing a theory of justice—a point at which status and power play no role in society:

> Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chose behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances.

Id.

comparison. The Sneetches are bird-like. McMonkey McBean—not surprisingly—looks like a monkey. It turns out that some sort of racial, ethnic, cultural, or national differences continue to exist after the Sneetches learn to see each other in humane terms. We don't know where McBean drives off to as the story ends, but presumably it is not far away. And it is his aura (and that of his ethnic or racial group) that haunts the story after we conclude its reading, for it is the McBeans of the world who retain status, wealth, and presumably power as the tale ends. The Sneetches have been had.

Bluntly put, the perception among the Sneetches that their bellies were deeply significant cost them dearly. Only when they were financially impoverished were they able to see the humanity in each and every Sneetch. McBean knew how to use their irrational taste for stars to line his own pockets. He understood that the star-bellied elite would pay money to retain their status and that the bare-bellied folks would pay to improve theirs. Indeed, McBean, no dummy he, understood that he could demand more money from the elite to retain their elevated status than he could obtain from the less well-off to improve their caste. The Sneetches were so fixated on maintaining or attaining an elite status that they were willing to spend all of their money to gain it. In our present reality as well, it often costs money for those in the upper crust to maintain their status.[11] And no one can doubt that enormous financial costs are imposed on less respected groups seeking to move up the economic ladder. American politicians catering to the middle and upper classes, like the McBeans of the Sneetches' world, have a long history of maintaining their power by playing one class or group against another, especially working-class whites and blacks. McBean's departure from the beaches of the Sneetches with a truck full of money is a powerful symbol of the costs we have imposed on our society for our irrational hatreds and myopic dislikes.

The Sneetches is therefore a powerful symbol of the unavailability of a "post-racial" society in both the 1960s and today. At bottom, this story—as stunning and brilliant as it is—tells not a romantic and hopeful tale, but a disturbing one about social dislocation and systemic, structural inequality that is not remediable by hopeful statements about the innate humanity in every person. At the end of the book, the hand-in-hand Sneetches on the beaches walk—impoverished but hopeful—toward an unknown life, while McBean, grinning from ear to ear, drives into the sunset a rich man. Rather than a society of equals, the story ends with greater inequality than existed in its opening pages. While the ethnic, racial, or religious group Seuss called Sneetches may have resolved their internal squabbles, the McBeans of their world end up with all the money and all the status. The romantic believers in equality have nothing. The seeming happiness of the tale disappears into a gloomy, painful reality.

And that is why we organized the symposium and this symposium issue: to use the multi-layered social commentary found in some of the most important Seuss books as a vehicle for thinking deeply about our most prominent social problems—racial, cultural, national, and ethnic discrimination, gender and sexuality inequalities,

11. Education is a perfect example. It is the single most important "asset" left to the next generation by those in the upper echelons of society. At least in the United States, gaining access to the better universities often is limited to those who are well-off. Attendance is extremely expensive.

economic deprivation, the depredation of our environment, the short-sighted biases of much of the business world, and the continued spread and use of deadly armaments. That children's books can be used to provoke rich discussions led by such a wonderful group of speakers[12] and authors[13] is a remarkable compliment to Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel. I stand in awe of his accomplishments—of his ability to use children's literature to provoke in adults a desire to improve the world.

12. Among the speakers at the symposium were Donald E. Pease, the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professor in the Humanities at Dartmouth College, Lani Guiner, Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, Jorge Contreras, Associate Professor of Law at American University Washington College of Law, and Alice Korngold, President and CEO of Korngold Consulting. For a complete list of speakers at the symposium see *Program: Exploring Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss*, N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. (Mar. 1, 2013), http://www.nylslawreview.com/dr-seuss-program/.

13. *See, e.g.*, Tamara C. Belinfanti, *The Origin: Opening Remarks to* Exploring Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 501 (2013–2014); Donald E. Pease, *Dr. Seuss's (Un)Civil Imaginaries*, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 509 (2013–2014); Peter Nicolas, The Sneetches *as an Allegory for the Gay Rights Struggle: Three Prisms*, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 525 (2013–2014); Naomi Mezey & Gabe Lezra, *Forms of Affiliation: Family, Democracy, and Civil Society in* Horton Hears a Who!, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 547 (2013–2014); Anne McGillivray, *Horton Hears a Twerp: Myth, Law, and Children's Rights in* Horton Hears a Who!, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 569 (2013–2014); Jorge L. Contreras, *No Matter How Small… Property, Autonomy, and State in* Horton Hears a Who!, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 603 (2013–2014); John Hursh, *International Law, Armed Conflict, and the Construction of Otherness: A Critical Reading of Dr. Seuss's* The Butter Battle Book *and a Renewed Call for Global Citizenship*, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 617 (2013–2014); Roger S. Clark, *Is* The Butter Battle Book*'s Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo Banned? What Has International Law to Say About Weapons of Mass Destruction?*, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 655 (2013–2014); Tamara C. Belinfanti, *Forget Roger Rabbit—Is Corporate Purpose Being Framed?*, 58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 675 (2013–2014); Doni Gewirtzman, *The Seussian Dead Hand: Concluding Remarks to* Exploring Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss, 58 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 701 (2013–2014).