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Dr. Seuss's (Un)Civil Imaginaries

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I. INTRODUCTION

To my knowledge, the symposium that gave rise to this publication was the first to address the importance of Dr. Seuss's children's stories to American civil society. The chief legacy of Seuss's more than sixty children's books is their ability to inspire and empower children. But their readership is not restricted to children. Seuss's imagination has created trans-generational communities whose adult members recite to their children the very stories their parents had read to them. Seuss's iconic stories coordinate various reading publics with the problems and aspirations of a liberal democratic society.

Each Seuss story connects an exemplar of a social dilemma to a dynamic, dramatic movement so as to provide readers with the resources to negotiate plural, often contradictory models of civic identity. Whereas *The Lorax*¹ and *The Butter Battle Book*² provide definitive representations of political crises and advocate specific public action, others, like *Horton Hatches the Egg*,³ communicate emotional dilemmas and generate moral crises that oblige readers to decide where they stand. In *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*,⁴ a character who was initially perceived as a threat to the public good becomes the basis for social betterment. In *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*,⁵ the need for security displayed by the beasts who have taken up residence within Thidwick's antlers is set in opposition to the big-hearted creature's need for moose-moss and liberty.

The intertwining of its separate, though linked, principles of liberalism and democracy turns American liberal democracy into at once a historical achievement and an ongoing political experiment. It is because Seuss's stories have provided an effective means of displaying and negotiating various contradictions of civic life that they have become important to the formation of liberal democratic citizenship. The tension between liberal and democratic identities inspired Seuss to imagine characters whose practices of civic life range from the anarchic playfulness of the Cat in the Hat to the cynical alienation of the Grinch.

The intense visual and verbal eloquence of these stories explains their importance within American civil society. In fusing social knowledge with paradigmatic scenes, Seuss's stories activate deep structures of belief underpinning civic judgments that readers can assign to particular cases. Each story provides a pattern of motivation that makes certain responses more plausible than others. But the meaning of the knowledge and judgments that Seuss's stories communicate exceeds any single interpretive code.

As they circulate throughout various public cultures and subcultures, Seuss's stories impart predicaments inherent to the national society that have solicited a wide range of interpretive responses. How can the readers of Seuss's stories negotiate

1. DR. SEUSS, *THE LORAX* (1971).

2. DR. SEUSS, *THE BUTTER BATTLE BOOK* (1984).

3. DR. SEUSS, *HORTON HATCHES THE EGG* (1940).

4. DR. SEUSS, *HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS!* (1957).

5. DR. SEUSS, *THIDWICK THE BIG-HEARTED MOOSE* (1948).

the ongoing tension between individual autonomy and collective governance, between self-interest and the common good, and between communitarianism and liberal individualism?

It is because these stories are open to at times contradictory interpretations that they have become central to the education of the civic imagination. They enable the children who read them to feel free to work out their own attitudes toward essentially contested concepts in American democracy. They model normative behavior even as they pose aesthetic challenges to those norms and inspire imaginative strategies to change them.

Over the years, these children's books have become sites for representing, contesting, and stabilizing the meaning of American democracy. A typical Seuss story acts as a medium that turns reading in the domestic sphere into a primary means of representing and performing civic identity. Children are able to understand the lessons communicated in a Seuss story long before they are capable of thinking in abstract terms. Seuss's illustrated stories provide needed social, emotional, and mnemonic resources for the construction of civic identity and action. Individually and collectively, these stories stage emotionally complex mediations of contradictions inherent to liberal democracy.

The creatures in Seuss's zoopolis construct an affective public sphere capable of anchoring readers' expressive responses. Because they are linked to the structural tensions underlying American liberal democracy, however, the conflicting feelings his creatures evoke cannot be easily reconciled. The animals in Seuss's ménage have promoted civic ideologies that turn on the tensions between liberal and civic republican (*Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*), liberal and democratic (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*), and egalitarian and inegalitarian (*The Sneetches*⁶).

As these remarks suggest, the citizenship presupposed in Seuss's stories is more than a legal identity; it is an interpretive framework and a regulative ideal that creates its own deep rule—the habit of being attentive and respectful to “persons no matter how small.” Before turning to a discussion of the story in which Seuss enunciates this rule, I want to discuss the importance of the civic imagination to the creator of Seuss's stories, Theodor Seuss Geisel.

Part II of this article explains how Geisel's experiences as the victim of bullying and intolerance during his childhood in Springfield, Massachusetts played a significant role in his artistic development. Part III shows how those childhood events supplied the backdrop for one of the most emblematic Seuss stories, *Horton Hears a Who!*, in which a civil society was brought into crisis due to the destructive effects of its members' mutual distrust and intolerance. The story explains how a society reconciled individualism and community as contesting models of citizenship grounded in conflicting valuations. Part IV also focuses on *Horton Hears a Who!*, and proposes that the story is best understood as a paradigmatic case study of the rule of reciprocal care that resides at the core of Seuss's civic imagination.

6. DR. SEUSS, *The Sneetches*, in *THE SNEETCHES AND OTHER STORIES* (1961).

II. DR. SEUSS'S ARTS OF (IN)CIVILITY

Geisel's lived history supplied the affective visceral resources for Seuss's artistic career, which spanned eight decades and was marked by a profound shift in artistic orientation. This shift was from that of a satirist who cultivated the savage arts of incivility to that of a creator of creatures in children's books who knew how to convert hostility into hospitality. Geisel's tendency to place the characters of his children's books at an impasse, with no visible way out, and then track their attempts to extricate themselves from these situations, reflects his own personal tendency to "[get into] jams [and then] plot[] how to get out."⁷ Geisel's extraordinary career tracked a zigzag trajectory out of his encounter with a comparable series of impasses and dramatic changes of perspective that drew upon his childhood experiences.⁸

Geisel was born in Springfield, Massachusetts on March 2, 1904.⁹ His mother, Henrietta, was the daughter of a German baker, George Seuss; his father, Theodor Robert Geisel, was the son of the German-born co-owner of a successful Springfield brewery.¹⁰ The prosperity of his grandfather's successful brewery contributed to the Geisel family's proud sense of belonging to the Springfield community.¹¹ The merriment accompanying the horse-drawn carriages as they made their daily deliveries of the family's trademark beer made the boy feel as if he were part of an ongoing circus parade.¹² Young Geisel took pleasure at his mother Henrietta's delight with the tall tales and nonsensical words he made up on his way home from school, and with the fantastic creatures that he etched on the walls of the Geisel home.¹³ When he was a child, his mother protected his art by refusing to permit his father to erase his drawings from the bedroom wall.¹⁴

World War I and Prohibition cataclysmically changed both the Geisel family's fortune and Ted Geisel's art.¹⁵ When Charles Foster Kane, the character Orson Welles invented to allegorize the fears and aspirations of American civil society, pronounced the word "Rosebud" on his deathbed, this childhood plaything recalled Kane to an irretrievably lost world of security and love. In contrast, Seuss's "Rosebud" was neither an irretrievably lost object nor markedly absent from his imaginative life. Seuss obtained access to the sources for his visionary productions in Geisel's

7. See generally JUDITH MORGAN & NEIL MORGAN, DR. SEUSS & MR. GEISEL: A BIOGRAPHY 40 (1995) (discussing Geisel's time at Oxford's Lincoln College following his graduation from Dartmouth College).

8. I track Geisel's remarkable career by foregrounding the impasses he converted into enabling turning points in DONALD E. PEASE, THEODOR SEUSS GEISEL (2010). This article cites to that work extensively.

9. MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 5.

10. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 4

11. *Id.* at 4–5.

12. *Id.* at 12.

13. *Id.* at 11.

14. *Id.* at 13.

15. *Id.* at 16.

ineradicable memory of daily events that took place at the outbreak of World War I, when he would be accosted while walking to and from school by boys with rocks and brickbats screaming, “Kill the Kaiser’s kid!” and “Drunken Kaiser!”¹⁶

The specter of German authoritarianism that inspired his playmates’ jeers would haunt Geisel throughout much of his life. Their vindictive name-calling led Geisel to invent the persona of a satirist as a mode of artistic expression through which he transformed the aggression directed against him into arts of hostility—caricature, parody, invective—that transfigured these word-wounds into sources of savage comic pleasure.¹⁷

Different aspects of this crisis recurred at key moments in Geisel’s life. Before this life-changing event, Geisel had enjoyed an idyllic childhood within Springfield’s tightly knit German-American community. The anti-German sentiment aroused during World War I devastated Geisel’s extended German-American family. Meanwhile, Prohibition deprived Geisel’s nuclear family of its primary source of income.

When Geisel boarded the train from Springfield to New Hampshire to matriculate at Dartmouth College in 1921, he went in search of a substitute family.¹⁸ Over the next seventy years of his life, Geisel’s romance with the alternative family he found at Dartmouth restored the security and sense of belonging from which World War I and Prohibition had disconnected him. Geisel’s college classmates and faculty mentors would become lifelong friends, a reliable audience for his art, and honorary siblings.

It was Geisel’s work on the *Jack-O-Lantern*, the college’s humor magazine, that defined his Dartmouth experience. The *Jack-O-Lantern* afforded Geisel the ideal space to refine his skills. Its readership supplied Geisel with an audience before whom he performed his student career as a form of public entertainment. At Dartmouth, Geisel cultivated the grand entrance, the surprise event, and the decisive turn of phrase; the popularity of his contributions to the humor magazine resulted in his being recognized as one of Dartmouth’s most influential students.¹⁹

In his junior year, Geisel confided to friends that he would consider his Dartmouth career a failure if he were not elected editor of the *Jack-O-Lantern*. On May 15, 1924, the *Jack-O-Lantern*’s board elected Geisel its editor-in-chief.²⁰ But in his senior year at Dartmouth, Geisel underwent an experience that proved almost as disorienting as his boyhood classmates’ bullying in Springfield. It began when Geisel threw a party for the members of the *Jack-O* staff at which he served bootleg gin. At

16. *Id.* at 14.

17. *Id.* at 17–21.

18. *Id.* at 25.

19. *Id.* at 28; MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 36.

20. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 33. Seuss later attested to the significance of this date when he recorded “the 15th of May” as the date on which Horton was successful in his effort to save the village of Who-ville from certain destruction at the hands of the Wickersham Brothers.

the peak of the evening's festivities, the chief of the Hanover Police Department took all the young men into custody for liquor-law violations.²¹

After being apprised of this mischief, Dean Craven Laycock removed Geisel from his position as editor-in-chief of the *Jack-O-Lantern* and barred him from contributing to the periodical he had spent four years establishing as a cutting-edge college publication. The dean's decision publicly severed the vital core of Geisel's Dartmouth identity. After brooding for more than a week, Geisel devised a comic stratagem that enabled him to continue to contribute to the *Jack-O-Lantern* while still obeying the conditions of the dean's punishment to the letter. He submitted a series of cartoons to the magazine, but rather than signing them with the surname of the figure under the dean's prohibition, Geisel took public figures' names as pseudonyms, including "L. Pasteur" (in reference to the famous French chemist and microbiologist) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (the English poet and painter). Finally, Geisel used his mother's maiden name, "Seuss," as a pen name to create the cartoons that appeared in that issue. The signature "Seuss" enabled him to convert his anger, humiliation, and shame into a symbolic event.²² The use of "Seuss" transformed the experiential loss that an authority figure had inflicted upon him into the imaginative gain of a password that gave him access to the childhood sources of his art.

The humorous technique informing the art that Geisel contributed to Dartmouth's humor magazine in the wake of his punishment was premised on the pleasurable circumvention of moral inhibitions and logical constraints.²³ The occupations that Geisel took up after graduating Dartmouth in 1925 enabled him to refine and extend the comic technology he invented there.²⁴

Before he began writing children's books, Geisel achieved fame as the author of trenchant anti-Prohibition satires, slapstick burlesques, political cartoons, surrealist sculptures, and zany "Quick, Henry, the Flit!" advertisements for Standard Oil's bug spray product.²⁵ Geisel began jotting down the poetic ramblings that would lead to his first children's book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*,²⁶ in 1936, as he sailed aboard the MS *Kungsholm* on his return trip to the United States from Germany; at the time, Adolf Hitler was threatening to dominate both Geisel's ancestral homeland and the whole of Europe, just as Kaiser Wilhelm II had two decades earlier.²⁷

Geisel did not wholly identify his creative personality with the authorship of books for children until the 1950s. Beginning in 1936, he combined his work on for-hire projects such as the Standard Oil Flit and Esso Marine advertising campaigns

21. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 35–36.

22. *Id.* at 36–38.

23. *Id.* at 80.

24. *See generally id.* at 41–47 (surveying Geisel's professional life in his postgraduate years).

25. *Id.* at 44–48.

26. DR. SEUSS, *AND TO THINK THAT I SAW IT ON MULBERRY STREET* (1937).

27. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 1–2; MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 80–81.

with the creation of children's books.²⁸ A profound shift in the focus of Geisel's artistic imagination took place while he was working on the final scenes of his fifth children's book. On June 14, 1940, Geisel heard a radio announcer report that Nazi tanks had rolled into Paris. Unable to keep his attention on *Horton Hatches the Egg*, Geisel began drawing murderous cartoons of fascist leaders—one of Benito Mussolini's chief propagandist was sent by a friend to Ralph Ingersoll, the founding editor of the Popular Front newspaper *PM*.²⁹

The scores of political cartoons he published in *PM* between early 1941 and early 1943 empowered Geisel to confront head-on the German authoritarianism that cast a long shadow over his Springfield childhood.³⁰ Geisel was succinct in his description of *PM*'s rationale: "*PM* was against people who pushed people around. . . . I liked that."³¹ At thirty-eight, Geisel might have been too old for the draft, but he did not wish to confine his battles with Nazism and American nativism to the editorial pages of *PM*. So, on January 7, 1943, Geisel joined the Information and Education Division of the U.S. Army, with a commission in Frank Capra's signal corps unit at Fox Studios.³² Capra presented incoming recruits with the foundational precept of his "Fort Fox" unit, which profoundly influenced Geisel's understanding of the underpinnings of the civic imagination: "You are working for a common cause. Your personal egos and idiosyncrasies are unimportant. There will be no personal credit for your work, either on the screen or in the press. The only press notices we are eager to read are those of American victories!"³³

In April 1944, Capra entrusted Geisel with the job of creating an "occupation film" dubbed "Project 6010X," that explained to the American public what the soldiers' jobs would be when Germany surrendered and American troops remained as an occupation force; the film, entitled *Your Job in Germany*, began with a voiceover warning that "just as American soldiers had to do this job 26 years ago, so other American soldiers—your sons—might have to do it again another 20-odd years from now."³⁴

It was because Geisel firmly believed that Nazism would revive the anti-German prejudice that had devastated his Springfield childhood that he dedicated Seuss's art to the creation of political cartoons for *PM* and to the production of *Know Your*

28. *Id.* at 48–51.

29. *Id.* at 61.

30. See generally RICHARD H. MINEAR, DR. SEUSS GOES TO WAR: THE WORLD WAR II EDITORIAL CARTOONS OF THEODOR SEUSS GEISEL 10–12 (1999) (discussing Geisel's *PM* cartoons).

31. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 64.

32. MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 106.

33. JOSEPH McBRIDE, FRANK CAPRA: THE CATASTROPHE OF SUCCESS 453 (Univ. Press of Miss. 2011) (1992).

34. CHARLES D. COHEN, THE SEUSS, THE WHOLE SEUSS, AND NOTHING BUT THE SEUSS 262–63 (2004). The script for *Your Job in Germany* is deposited in Box 9, Folder 9 of the Dr. Seuss Collection at the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego; the official register for this collection is available at <http://libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/testing/html/mss0230a.html#containerlist> (last updated Mar. 21, 2012).

DR. SEUSS'S (UN)CIVIL IMAGINARIES

Enemy films under Capra's tutelage at Fort Fox. Doing this work enabled Seuss to exorcise what remained of the specter of German authoritarianism that had bedeviled Geisel's childhood.³⁵

When he left active duty, Geisel had trouble deciding which aspect of his creative persona—essayist, cartoonist, advertiser, filmmaker—he should cultivate.³⁶ Henry Jenkins, a media studies academic who has written extensively about Geisel and Seuss stories, has shrewdly observed that the baby boom led Geisel to think of childhood as a quasi-utopian space in which belief in peace, social equality, and democratic participation could be revived. As Jenkins has noted, Geisel once spelled out the criteria for these beliefs in a 1960 newspaper column:

Children's Reading and Children's Thinking are the rock bottom base upon which the future of this country will rise. Or not rise. In these days of tension and confusion, writers are beginning to realize that Books for Children have a greater potential for good, or evil, than any other form of literature on earth. They realize that the new generations *must* grow up to be more intelligent than *ours*.³⁷

Focusing on the baby boom generation allowed Geisel to explore the unheard voices of children who felt silenced by the adult world. Geisel decided that children comprised the audience he wanted to educate, and be educated by, because he believed that children possess a sense of fairness and justice and that they are immune to propaganda.³⁸ The challenge was to protect children from adults' corrupting authoritarian power, rather than indoctrinating them in newly forged orthodoxies. Geisel sought to protect children from adults' stultifying control by giving them a sense of their own potential. Because children are "thwarted people," Geisel was quoted as stating at a University of Utah workshop in July 1947, their chief "idea of tragedy is when someone says you can't do that."³⁹

Affirming the desire to write children's books that combined popular entertainment with instruction in ethical values, Geisel believed that the ideal children's book would make reading at once pleasurable and meaningful. He was also convinced that children, even more than their parents, are critical of the implausible and need to be sold their stories reasonably: "Children analyze fantasy. They know you're kidding them. There's got to be logic in the way you kid them.

35. But after the war, Geisel realized that Seuss's wartime propaganda had turned him into the mirror image of the boys who had beaten him with brickbats on Mulberry Street. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 74–75.

36. *Id.* at 73–74.

37. Henry Jenkins, "No Matter How Small": *The Democratic Imagination of Dr. Seuss*, in HOP ON POP: THE POLITICS AND PLEASURES OF POPULAR CULTURE 187 (Henry Jenkins et al. eds., 2002) (quoting Theodor Geisel, *Writing for Children: A Mission*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 27, 1960, at 11). The typescript for this article by Geisel—the working title of which, reportedly, was "Brat Books on the March"—is deposited in Box 18, Folder 8 of the Mandeville's Dr. Seuss Collection.

38. "You can't pour didacticism down little throats," Geisel once quipped. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 78.

39. Jenkins, *supra* note 37, at 196. Geisel's lecture notes for the July 1947 workshop at the University of Utah are deposited in Box 19, Folder 7 of the Mandeville's Dr. Seuss Collection.

Their fun is pretending . . . making believe they believe it.⁴⁰ He called the method whereby he manipulated his universe to appear reasonable to an ever skeptical audience “logical insanity.”⁴¹

Geisel’s return from the war also resulted in a transformation of Seuss’s art. In writing literature for children, Seuss wanted to get the war mentality out of Geisel’s psyche and out of America’s consciousness. Seuss specifically aspired to release his artwork from the logics of invective and ridicule to which it had been tethered. In a 1952 article on the sources of children’s laughter, Geisel reflected on the significance of this turning point for his aesthetic project by re-evaluating the conditions that social prejudice had placed on his art:

Conditioned laughter germinates, like toadstools on a stump. . . . This conditioned laughter the grown-ups taught you depended entirely upon *their* conditions. . . . Racial, religious and social conditions. You began to laugh at people your family feared or despised—people they felt inferior to, or people they felt better than. If your father said a man named Herbert Hoover was an ass, and asses should be laughed at, you laughed at Herbert Hoover. Or, if you were born across the street, you laughed at Franklin Roosevelt. . . . Then you learned it was socially advantageous to laugh at Protestants and/or Catholics. . . . You readily learned, according to your conditions, that you could become the bright boy of the party by harpooning a hook onto the Jews (or Christians), labor (or capital), or Turnverein or the Strawberry Festival. You still laughed for fun, but the fun was getting hemmed in by a world of regulations. You were laughing at subjects according to their listing on the ledger.⁴²

This prolonged deliberation over the sources and motives of his literary performances offered Geisel the public occasion to think about the conditioned humor from a child’s perspective. Children are unlike their adult counterparts, Geisel now realized, in that children do not need to direct their burlesques, caricatures, and parodies at a target they want to ridicule; they enjoy these visual and verbal exaggerations for the sheer fun of it: “[C]hildren never let their laughs out on a string. On their humor there is no political or social pressure gauge. That, I think, is why we maverick humorists prefer to write exclusively for children.”⁴³

By composing the *PM* cartoons and making the propaganda films at Fort Fox, Geisel had worked through much of what remained of the humiliation and rage that he had experienced as a boy on Mulberry Street. In 1953, Geisel informed his agent, Phyllis Jackson, that he intended to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the creation of what he now called the “unconditioned” humor informing his postwar children’s

40. MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 124 (quoting lecture notes deposited in Box 19, Folder 7 of the Mandeville’s Dr. Seuss Collection).

41. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 78 (quoting Robert Jennings, *Dr. Seuss: What Am I Doing Here*, SATURDAY EVENING POST, Oct. 23, 1965, at 107).

42. Dr. Seuss, . . . *But for Grown-Ups Laughing Isn’t Any Fun*, N.Y. TIMES BOOK REV., Nov. 16, 1952, at 2. This book review article by Geisel (qua Dr. Seuss) is deposited in Box 18, Folder 65 of the Mandeville’s Dr. Seuss Collection.

43. *Id.*

DR. SEUSS'S (UN)CIVIL IMAGINARIES

books: "It's been seven years since I gave up being a soldier. . . . Now I'd like to give up movies and advertising and anything else that means dueling with vice presidents and committees I want to stay in La Jolla and write children's books. . . . If I dropped everything else do you think I could count on royalties of five thousand dollars a year?"⁴⁴ Phyllis responded that because of the baby boom and his reputation, this was a reasonable expectation.

III. CIVIL RE-UNIONS

Geisel abandoned the writing of children's books to go to war at the moment Horton was about to hatch the elephant-bird.⁴⁵ Thirteen years later, Geisel reaffirmed his commitment to writing children's books by returning in *Horton Hears a Who!* to the character he had abandoned. The Horton who hatched the egg risked lifelong captivity rather than reneging on his word. The Horton who hears the previously inaudible cry for help of a population under threat of annihilation underwent a comparable ordeal.⁴⁶

Horton Hears a Who! is usually taken to be a rhymed plea for minority rights.⁴⁷ But Henry Jenkins has persuasively articulated a more complicated account of the story. According to Jenkins, when Horton listens to the Whos' all but inaudible "yopp," he is "caught between two different communities. On the one hand there is the conformist world of Horton's own neighbors, the Wickersham Brothers [But o]n the other hand there is the civic-minded community of Who-ville[, which, when f]aced by a crisis that threatens their survival . . . rally together to [e]nsure that their voices are heard"⁴⁸ According to Jenkins, *Horton Hears a Who!* expresses nostalgia for the "Whoville-like America of the war years, when political differences were forgotten in the name of a common cause and fear over the rigid Wickersham-like conformity of the 1950s."⁴⁹

44. MORGAN & MORGAN, *supra* note 7, at 140.

45. See PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 60–61.

46. Richard Minear has associated Geisel's 1953 visit to Japan as the occasion for his recalling the role that the Fort Fox film *Know Your Enemy: Japan* played in justifying the United States' dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. See MINEAR, *supra* note 30, at 262–65. Other commentators, such as Philip Nel, have acknowledged the significance of Geisel's involvement in creating wartime propaganda to his most powerful anti-prejudice books, including *Horton Hears a Who!* See, e.g., PHILIP NEL, DR. SEUSS: AMERICAN ICON 54 (The Continuum Int'l Publ'g Grp. 2004) (2003). The fact that Geisel dedicated *Horton Hears a Who!* to Mitsugi Nakamura, a Kyoto University professor he met on his 1953 trip, lends credence to this claim. Nel, however, cautions against restricting the meaning of the work to an allegory cautioning against anti-Japanese prejudice after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Id.*

47. See, e.g., THOMAS FENSCH, THE MAN WHO WAS DR. SEUSS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF THEODOR GEISEL 110 (2000); MINEAR, *supra* note 30, at 262–64; NEL, *supra* note 46, at 54; COHEN, *supra* note 34, at 220–21.

48. Jenkins, *supra* note 37, at 187. Jenkins, in support of his argument, quotes the following language from the book: "This is your town's darkest hour! / The time for all *Whos* who have blood that is red / To come to the aid of their country!"

49. *Id.*

But Seuss might not have drawn the lines of demarcation between these communities as starkly as Jenkins suggests. Horton certainly has the right to protect himself against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and public feeling when they rise to intolerance, indignation, and disgust. But the kangaroo and the Wickersham Brothers also possess the right to protect the society's institutions against what they consider to be Horton's destructive demands. The kangaroo considers Horton's claim to be carrying on a conversation with persons whose voices other members of the jungle community cannot hear to constitute a threat to the jungle peace. When the kangaroo upbraids Horton, she does so because she believes that he has violated one of the principles that have kept the jungle "peaceable":

For almost two days you've run wild and insisted
On chatting with persons who've never existed.
Such carryings-on in our peaceable jungle!
We've had quite enough of your bellowing bungle!⁵⁰

The Wickershams and the kangaroo believe that their social institutions—rational communication, reciprocal understanding, and collective participation—need to be protected against the threats to them posed by what they take to be Horton's hallucination. Although Horton cannot demonstrate that the Whos truly exist to the other members of his community, he nevertheless asks the community to assist him in protecting them. If the community collaborated to protect persons they can neither see nor hear, however, they would in effect give approval to a collective delusion. In doing so they would also violate the principle of reciprocal understanding that the kangaroo believes crucial to keeping the jungle "peaceable."

Readers know that what Horton says is true. The Whos do exist. They live in a highly organized society whose structure would appear to be more complex than the jungle culture in which Horton, the Wickershams, and the kangaroo reside. But the Wickershams and the kangaroo do not have access to Horton's and the readers' representations of Who-ville. The kangaroo and the Wickershams believe that their opposition to Horton's demands serves the common cause of a society that requires verifying the factuality of claims before they can be described as credible.⁵¹ Because they can find no evidence to support Horton's claim that the Whos exist, they consider Horton to be delusional, and they find his delusions threatening to the jungle's social order.

The jungle community cannot know the reality of what Horton is pointing to until they can hear what Horton hears. Horton cannot rationally expect the kangaroo and the Wickershams to acknowledge the truth of what he says unless he can communicate what he knows to them. That Horton wants to make what he says answerable to the imperatives of rational communication indicates that he shares their belief in the importance of reasoned communication.

50. DR. SEUSS, *HORTON HEARS A WHO!* (1954).

51. Jenkins can only describe their alarmed indignation over Horton's claims as "fascist" if he judges their reaction from Horton's perspective.

It is the remedy the kangaroo would impose—the total destruction of the source of Horton's hallucination—that appears out of proportion to the danger Horton ostensibly poses to the jungle community. Whereas the kangaroo figures Horton's advocacy to protect the Whos as the aberrant belief of a wayward individual, the Whos correctly interpret the kangaroo's conclusion as threatening the complete annihilation of their collective way of life. The Whos do indeed rally to confront this crisis that Horton's protectionism is in part responsible for causing.

But the readers of *Horton Hears a Who!* have no way of knowing whether the Whos' "civic-mindedness" preceded this event. When the Mayor of Who-ville drags Jo-Jo out of his apartment and demands that he add his voice to the collective outcry, he has compelled the smallest of the small members of Who-ville to join in aiding a community that apparently took no notice of his existence before this moment. Indeed, insofar as he is interested in protecting the continued viability of the Whos' community, the Mayor of Who-ville would appear to share the kangaroo's belief in guarding the interests of the community from the harm posed by a deviant individual.

Jo-Jo is the representative within the Who-ville community of a minoritized individual, a member of the community the Whos have relegated to the margins as at once extraneous and superfluous. The Who responsible for the restored audibility of the entire Who community is also the one with the least audible voice within their society. Were it not for the grave danger to Who-ville's survival posed by the kangaroo's demand for proof of Who-ville's existence, Jo-Jo might never have been asked to participate in the community. Jo-Jo's position within Who-ville is comparable to Horton's within his jungle culture. Like Horton, Jo-Jo had to be heard before he could join the community of voices. In a sense, Jo-Jo and Horton are versions of one another. Both represent excluded members who, when added to the community, can change the whole social order.

Jenkins aligns his reading with what he describes as "Seuss's outrage over the community's pillorying of the nonconformist Horton."⁵² But why does Jenkins not become comparably indignant over the Mayor's response to Jo-Jo the "very, *very* small shirker" who, like Horton, considers his personal interests more important than the community's? When Jenkins claims that the "contemptible Jo-Jo endangers his community by withholding his small voice from their noise-making efforts,"⁵³ has he not in effect argued that *Horton Hears a Who!* is not merely a plea for the rights of minoritized individuals, but that it is also a judgment that autonomous individuals have a reciprocal obligation to the welfare of the community? Only after Jo-Jo contributes his YOPP! do the kangaroo and the Wickershams hear the truth of Horton's claims that the Whos exist and that their way of life deserves protection. When the kangaroo judge and her Wickersham police hear what Jo-Jo's YOPP! has added, they also hear (in the sense that they make it a social reality) mutual care as a foundational principle of community. It was their need to hear this voice that brought

52. Jenkins, *supra* note 37, at 188.

53. *Id.*

about the Whos' recognition of Jo-Jo, who, prior to this act, was the least community-minded of Who-ville's members.

Horton's position within his jungle community is homologous to Jo-Jo's within Who-ville. Both Jo-Jo and Horton occupy minoritized positions within their respective communities and both reflect the principle of concern that is so vital to an individual's and community's betterment. The knowledge that Horton and Jo-Jo communicate is that mutual care is a principle that applies to the smallest (least socialized and most minoritized) individual's relationship to the community as well as to the majoritarian community's attitude toward the least recognized (and hence most minoritized) of its members.

Despite the complexities he adds to the prevailing understanding, Jenkins's account is nonetheless representative of interpretations of *Horton Hears a Who!* that assign Horton an ideological stance opposed to the kangaroo's.⁵⁴ But the children's stories Seuss published after the war—from *The Sneetches* to *The Butter Battle Book*—subvert the need to organize social life in terms of such intractable oppositions. *Horton Hears a Who!* produces an imaginary civic event in which the need to protect the community against the danger posed by a subversive individual and the autonomous individual's obligation to contribute to the welfare of the community are made to coincide.

Horton Hears a Who! results in the betterment of both communities and individuals because every person in both communities now affirms a moral principle that everyone can embrace. Who-ville and Horton-ville share the condition of having moved from political communities organized around the principle of "All but one" to the compound principle "One for all and all for one another."

IV. CONCLUSION: DR. SEUSS'S CIVIC IMAGINARY

Listening to the inaudible voice of the Whos also recalled Geisel to his true vocation as a writer of children's books, whose work is grounded in the belief that it is children who can change the rules by which people live. In his view, children who were listened to and whose imaginations were celebrated would grow up to be the kind of democratic citizens the world needed.⁵⁵

Geisel knew that *Horton Hears a Who!* would be used to educate children about the contradictory relationship between the individual and the community, both in the United States and in emerging democratic cultures around the world. The torment Horton suffers at the hands of the Wickersham Brothers recalls the ridicule to which young Geisel had been subjected on his way back and forth from school during World War I. But the contours of the story constitute a reflection in the field of children's literature of the destructive effects of the antagonisms and impasses that the Cold War mentality had imposed on American civil society.⁵⁶

54. See *supra* note 47.

55. PEASE, *supra* note 8, at 77–80.

56. See generally STEPHEN E. KERCHER, *REVEL WITH A CAUSE: LIBERAL SATIRE IN POSTWAR AMERICA* 25 (2006) (discussing Geisel's postwar political cartooning).

DR. SEUSS'S (UN)CIVIL IMAGINARIES

After World War II, Geisel divorced Seuss's art from the reactive violence inherent to liberal and conservative strains of anti-communism that he considered jointly responsible for destroying the fabric of civil society.⁵⁷ A simple principle resides at the core of Seuss's rules for civil society: for citizenship to take hold, it must be based on the recognition that civility is a form of reciprocal concern capable of warding off the reactive violence that perpetuates war. The burden Geisel placed on Seuss's imagination to inculcate this recognition is evidenced in the ethical injunction the Once-ler pronounces at the conclusion of *The Lorax*: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."⁵⁸

57. *See id.* at 24–26.

58. *THE LORAX*, *supra* note 1.