

Rethinking Dr. Seuss for NEA's Read Across America Day:
Racism Within Dr. Seuss's Children's Books &
The Case for Centering Diverse Books

Prepared for

Read Across America Advisory Committee
National Education Association

By

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Background

On March 2nd, I wrote an [article on Dr. Seuss's history](#) drawing anti-Black, anti-Japanese political cartoons and advertisements that depicted Black people as monkeys; referred to Black people as “n*****”; and, incited the mass incarceration and killing of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II. In the wake of an alarming rise in hate crimes and hate speech against students of color in schools across the country, it was a call to action for the National Education Association (NEA) to reconsider what it means to celebrate Dr. Seuss, and remove him as both the face, and focus of, their annual Read Across America Day.

The article was published by Blavity, a leading news source for Black millennials, with over 7 million unique visitors a month. It was also shared and widely circulated via Black Lives Matter Media, a platform that calls attention to racism towards a movement for local and global change. Wake Up With WURD, a Black-owned Philadelphia-based morning radio show, invited me on their program to discuss the article and present alternatives to a focus on Dr. Seuss.

Most were shocked and previously unaware of Dr. Seuss's racist works. Some responded saying they will never buy a Dr. Seuss book again. Others said they will keep their kid home from school for Read Across America Day next year. Of those that spoke out in defense of Seuss, the recurring argument was: “but his children's books are not racist”. They rationalized that the racism of the political cartoons was “in his past,” and that he had “made a turn,” as evidenced by his children's books that “promote tolerance” and are “anti-racist”.

I knew the books seemed to center whiteness by featuring predominantly white characters, but I did not have an understanding of the extent and manner in which any characters of color were represented. To assess this, I conducted a critical analysis of race in 50 of Dr. Seuss's most popular children's books;¹ an examination of *The Cat in the Hat* as a reflection of blackface minstrelsy and anti-Black references in American culture; and, a critical analysis of themes of “tolerance” and “anti-racism” in *The Sneetches* and *Horton Hears a Who!* The findings are presented in this report.

Moving beyond a critique of Dr. Seuss, this report is solution-focused. It makes the case for using Read Across America Day to acknowledge, empower, and celebrate diverse books, voices, and experiences. It presents a list of alternative authors, whose work (and lives) reflect, sustain, and honor the diversity of our youth, communities, country, and world.

¹ 50 Dr. Seuss books were selected for inclusion in the analysis based on their availability. Every Dr. Seuss children's book available at the Theodor Seuss Geisel Library (UCSD) and surrounding public libraries was included in the analysis. There were 50 total children's books available, out of the approximately 61 total children's books Dr. Seuss wrote.

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Critical Analysis of Race in 50 Dr. Seuss Children's Books

To assess the manner and extent in which characters of color are represented in Dr. Seuss's books, a critical analysis of race was conducted in 50 of his most popular children's books.

The critical analysis included:

1. A count of the number of white characters in each children's book;
2. A count of the number of characters of color in each children's book;
3. An examination of the physical characteristics of each character of color;
4. An examination of each character of color's role within the context of the book, including their interaction with, and place in relation to, other characters;
5. Identification of themes of exotification, dehumanization, subservience, stereotypes and caricature for each character of color²; and,
6. Photographs of each character of color and notes on any relevant accompanying text from the book³.

Summary:

- Of the 2240 human characters identified in 50 Dr. Seuss children's books, 98% are white.
- Of the 2240 human characters, there are 45 characters of color, representing 2% of the total number of human characters.
- Of the 45 characters of color, all 45 (100%) are depicted in a racist manner.
- Every single character of color is portrayed through at least 3, and sometimes all 5, of the following⁴ themes:
 - Subservience: "Useful in an inferior capacity: subordinate: submissive"
 - Dehumanization: "To deprive of human qualities, personality, spirit / to treat someone as though he or she is not human / animalize / beastialize"
 - Exotification: "portrayed as originating in or characteristic of a distant foreign country / very different / strange / unusual / "other""
 - Stereotypes: "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment / to believe unfairly that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same"
 - Caricature: "exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics"

² These themes emerged while conducting the analysis. They were recurring with each character of color and are identified and labeled specifically in the full critical analysis in the Appendix.

³ For full critical analysis of Dr. Seuss's children's books, including the list of the 50 books analyzed, the title of each book featuring characters of color, pictures from the books of the characters of color, a written description, and any relevant accompanying text from the page, see Appendix.

⁴ See Appendix for a breakdown of which themes apply to each character of color

- Of the 45 characters of color, 2 are “African”, 14 are “Asian”, and 29 are “turban-wearing” characters who are sometimes attributed an ethnicity, but are generally of unknown country or race.
- Of the 2 “African” characters:
 - Both are depicted as monkeys (in the same likeness that Seuss depicted Africans and African Americans in his racist political cartoons).
 - They are shirtless and shoeless.
 - Both are wearing grass skirts.
 - They have tufts of hair sprouting out of their heads that are identical to the tuft of hair on the exotic animal they are carrying.
 - Both are depicted in a subservient role, carrying an animal to a white male child’s zoo.
- Of the 14 “Asian” characters:
 - One is labeled as “Chinese” and one is labeled as “a Japanese”.
 - Twelve of the “Asian” characters are of unknown country or ethnicity.
 - Eleven of the 14 “Asian” characters are wearing stereotypical, conical “rice paddy hats”.
 - The three (and only) “Asian” characters who are not seen wearing “rice paddy hats”, are carrying an animal in a large cage on top of their heads. There is a white male child holding a gun, standing on top of the animal cage that is being balanced on top of their heads.
 - The “Japanese” character is referred to as “a Japanese”, has a bright yellow face and is standing on what appears to be Mt. Fuji.
 - The “Chinese” character is shown with bright yellow skin and “slanted eyes”. He is running with chopsticks and a bowl of rice in his hands. The caption reads “...A Chinese man Who eats with sticks...”, which is the updated version of the text. The original version read, "a yellow-faced chinamen who eats with sticks". It is notable that this “Chinese” man is wearing traditional *Japanese* footwear called geta.
 - The 12 “Asian” characters of unknown country or ethnicity appear in the book *If I Ran The Zoo*. They are all featured in subservient roles, hunting down or carrying exotic animals for the white male child’s zoo. They are described by Dr. Seuss in the text as “helpers that all wear their eyes at a slant” from “countries no one can spell”.
- Of the 29 characters wearing turbans:
 - Fifteen are riding exotic animals, including camels, elephants and zebras, and four are playing exotic instruments.
 - The majority of the turbans have large feathers coming out of the top of them and the characters are typically wearing curled-toe slippers.

- Two of the “turban-wearing” characters are in a subservient role, “fetching” an egg for the white male child; seven of the “turban-wearing” characters are in a subservient role, driving a cart full of white males; and, 8 more are in a subservient role, carrying a caged animal for a white male child.
- One of the white men being driven by the “turban-wearing” man is smiling while holding a whip⁵ above the “turban-wearing” man of the color and the elephant he is riding on.
- Two “turban-wearing” characters are members of the circus, riding exotic animals. They are drawn in the same exact color as the caged ape, who is in the circus with them.
- One of the “turban-wearing” characters is referenced as being suitable to bring back, along with the exotic animals, to be on display in the white male child’s zoo. In the book, *If I Ran the Zoo*, Seuss’s text reads “A Mulligatawny is fine for my zoo And so is a chieftain (referring to the turban-wearing man), I'll bring one back too". There is a notable history of white people putting people of color on display in zoos (see [David, 2013](#)).⁶

These findings categorically refute the argument that Dr. Seuss’s children’s books themselves are not racist. Beyond centering and upholding whiteness, they present subservient, dehumanizing, exotifying and stereotypical caricatures of people of color. It was surprising to see the extent and clarity to which this was the case, considering the number of people who uphold Dr. Seuss books as “promoting tolerance”, and even, “anti-racist”. It is possible that the reader’s own racial bias is preventing racist caricatures and stereotypes from being recognized, that they have never consciously or critically looked at how the characters of color are depicted, or perhaps both. Regardless of whether these racist caricatures are consciously recognized and/or acknowledged or not, they have an important impact on young readers.

Implications for Youth

Exposing children to books that center whiteness and depict people of color in racist, dehumanizing, exotifying, subservient and stereotypical caricatures, has the capacity to both ingrain and reinforce the following in youth:

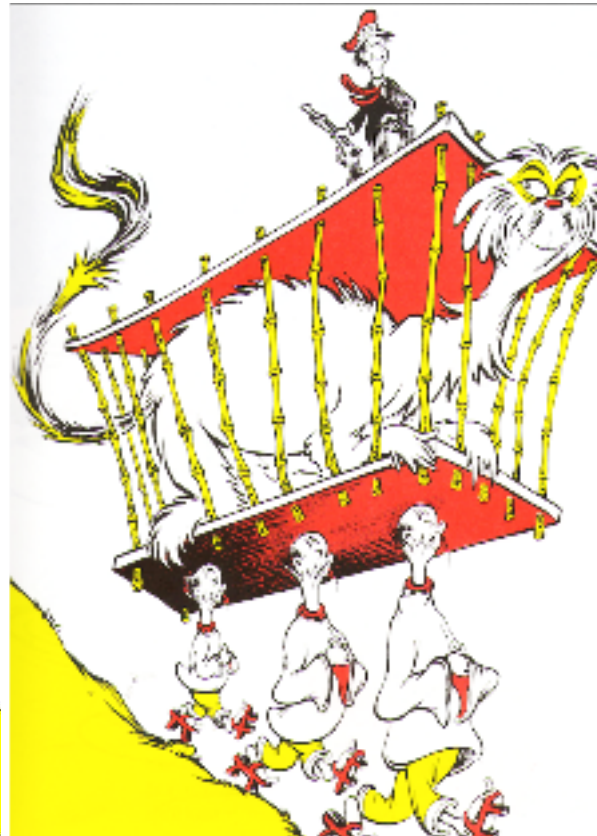
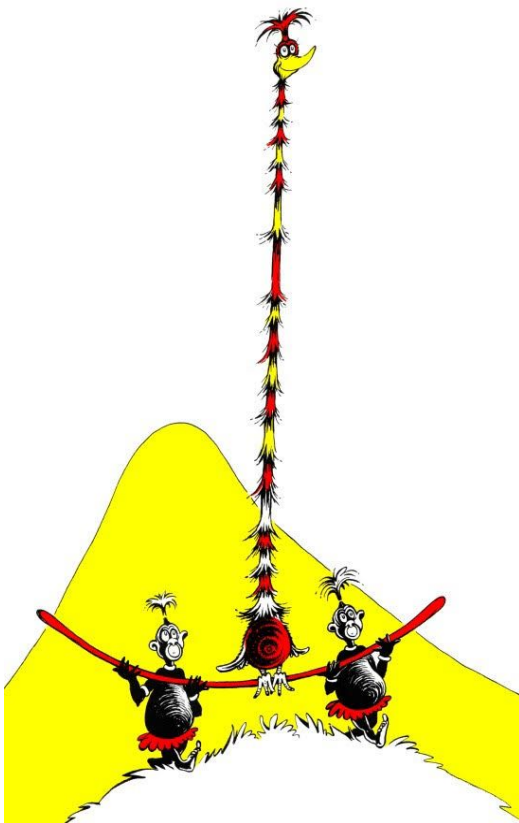
1. Whiteness is central and dominant, and people of color are peripheral and subordinate.

⁵ Whips are traditionally used to exert control over humans and animals through pain compliance or fear of pain.

⁶ One example of the sad human history of racism — of colonizers seeing themselves as superior to others — is the long history of human zoos that featured Africans and conquered indigenous peoples, putting them on display in much the same way as animals. People would be kidnapped and brought to be exhibited in human zoos. It was not uncommon for these people to die quickly, even within a year of their captivity. This history is long and deep and continued into the 1950s. The World’s Fair, in 1889 was visited by 28 million people, who lined up to see 400 indigenous people as the major attraction. The 1900 World’s Fair followed suit, as did the Colonial Exhibitions in Marseilles (1906 and 1922) and in Paris (1907 and 1931) which displayed naked or semi-naked humans in cages. Paris saw 34 million people attend their exhibition in six months alone. Just four years shy of the 20th century, the Cincinnati Zoo kept one hundred Sioux Native Americans in a mock village at the zoo for three months. In 1906, the amateur anthropologist Madison Grant, who was the head of the New York Zoological Society, put a Congolese pygmy Ota Benga, on display at the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The display was in the primate exhibit, and Ota was often made to carry around chimpanzees and other apes. Eugenicist and zoo director William Hornaday labeled Ota, “The Missing Link.” (David, 2013)

2. People of color are only relevant only as a “prop” to, or “exoticized other” of, the white narrative. “They” are not like “us”. “We” cannot pronounce “their” names or the countries “they’re” from.
3. People of color are subhuman and have the same status and/or appearance as animals:
 - a. Black people are and/or look like monkeys.
 - b. People of color belong in cages, on display in the zoo.
4. People of color are subservient and work for/”perform” at the disposal of, and/or for the entertainment and profit of, white adults and children (particularly white males). It is appropriate to use physical force/pain compliance to enforce this (i.e. whips, guns).

Below are five examples of the characters of color in Dr. Seuss's children's books, including: 1) Africans from the “the African island of Yerka” carrying an animal for a white male child; 2) Asian “helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant” carrying a caged animal and white male child holding a gun; 3) the reference to placing a person of color in the white child's zoo: “A Mulligatawny is fine for my zoo And so is a chieftain. I'll bring one back too.”; 4) “A Chinese boy who eats with sticks” depicted with bright yellow skin and *Japanese* footwear; and, 5) “Persians” carrying a basket for the white male child: “what *their* names are, I don't know. So don't ask it.” For full critical analysis of race, see Appendix (page 27).





Racial Analysis of *The Cat in the Hat* as Blackface Minstrel

The “Cat in the Hat” is significant as Dr. Seuss’s most hypervisible and iconic character. The book, *The Cat in the Hat*, is the 2nd best-selling Dr. Seuss book of all time (after *Green Eggs & Ham*), has sold 15.5 million copies (Random House), and is the 9th best-selling children’s books of all time (Publisher’s Weekly). The NEA named it one of its “Teachers’ Top 100 Books for Children” and sells the iconic red and white striped hat through its Read Across America website. Children and adults across the country will be seen wearing the “Cat’s” hat at school on Dr. Seuss’s birthday every year for Read Across America Day.

In his upcoming book, [*“Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books”*](#), Dr. Philip Nel, children's literature scholar and University Distinguished Professor of English, presents extensive research on the racialized origins of *The Cat in the Hat* as “inspired by blackface performance, racist images in popular culture, and actual African Americans” (Nel, 2015).⁷

The “Cat’s” appearance in *The Cat in the Hat*, was inspired from an actual Black woman named Annie Williams (Nel, 2017). She was an elevator operator at the Boston offices of Seuss’s publishers at Houghton Mifflin (Nel, 2017). In 1955, Seuss was at their offices to meet William Spaulding, who tasked Seuss that day with creating a children’s book that was entertaining, as well as educational (Nel, 2017). Spaulding and Seuss rode up to the offices in the elevator with

⁷ For additional excerpts from Nel’s 28 page book chapter “Was the Cat in the Hat Black?...” see Appendix

Ms. Williams. Later, Seuss recalled Annie William's "leather half-glove and secret smile" (Beckerman, 2017). When Seuss created the "Cat", "he gave him Mrs. William's white gloves, her sly smile, and her color" (Nel, 2017).

The Cat was also influenced by actual blackface performers and minstrelsy, which is seen in both the Cat's physical appearance, and the role he plays in the books. Physical attributes mirroring actual blackface performers include: "The Cat's umbrella (which he uses as a cane) and outrageous fashion sense link him to Zip Coon, that floppish "northern dandy negro". His bright red floppy tie recalls the polka-dotted ties of blackfaced Fred Astaire in *Swing Time* (1936) and of blackfaced Mickey Rooney in *Babes in Arms* (1939). His red-and-white-striped hat brings to mind Rooney's hat in the same film or the hats on the minstrel clowns in the silent picture *Off to Bloomingdale Asylum*" (Nel, 2017).



Dr. Seuss partook in minstrelsy and blackface performance himself. He wrote and acted in a minstrel show for his high school called "Chicopee Surprised", and performed in blackface (Nel, 2017). Minstrel shows exploited Black stereotypes for profit and mocked African Americans and Black culture. They mimicked white perceptions of the attributes and function of Blacks as: "subservient", "ignorant", "buffoonish", and serving/performing at the pleasure (and profit) of whites.

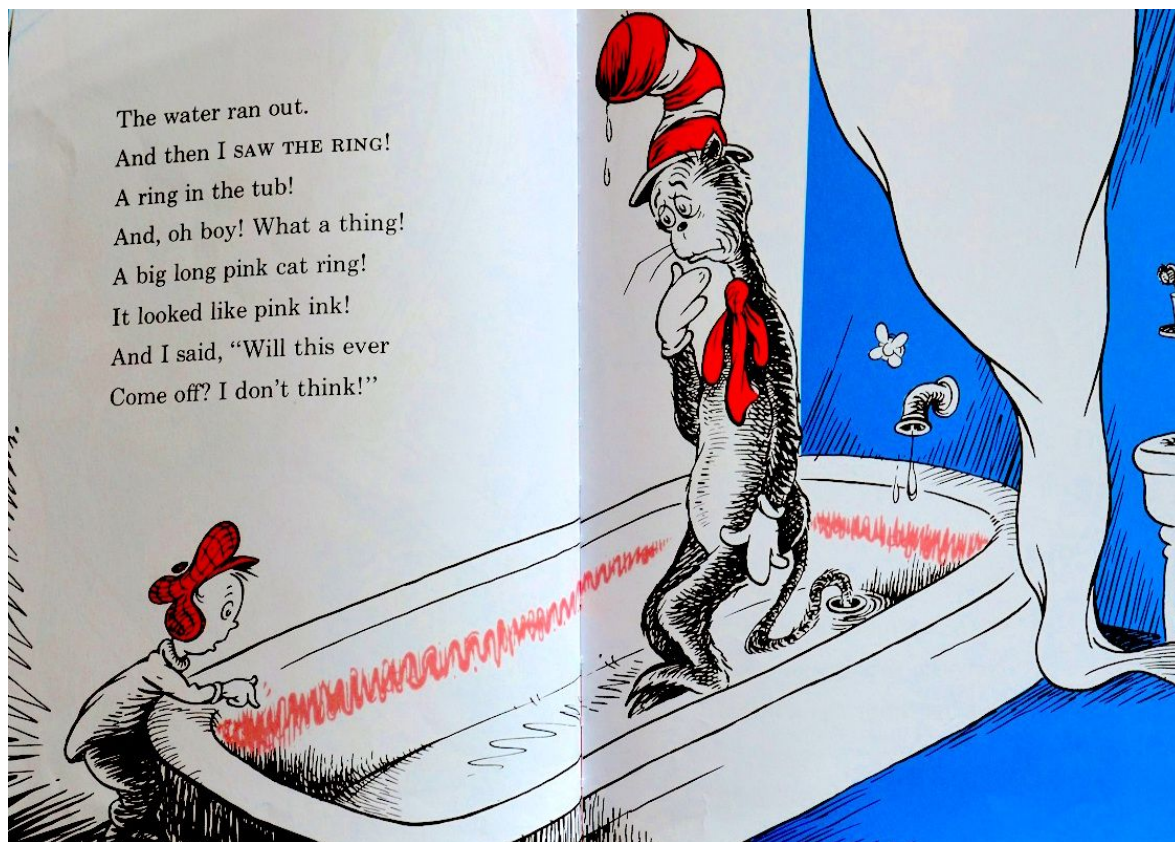
The role the Cat "performs" in *The Cat in the Hat* mimics the role of blackface performers in minstrel shows. The "black" Cat's purpose is to entertain and perform "tricks" for the white children: "I know some new tricks, A lot of good tricks. I will show them to you. Your mother Will not mind at all if I do" (Seuss, 1957).

The "black" Cat is there for entertainment value, but the fish is very clear that he does not belong in the house with the white children: "No! No! Make that cat go away! Tell that Cat in the Hat

You do NOT want to play. He should not be here. He should not be about. He should not be here” (Seuss, 1957). The Cat causes chaos in the white family’s home (Nel, 2017), and the fish censures the cat by saying, “Now look what you did! Now look at this house! You shook up our house. You SHOULD NOT be here. You get out of this house (Seuss, 1957)!

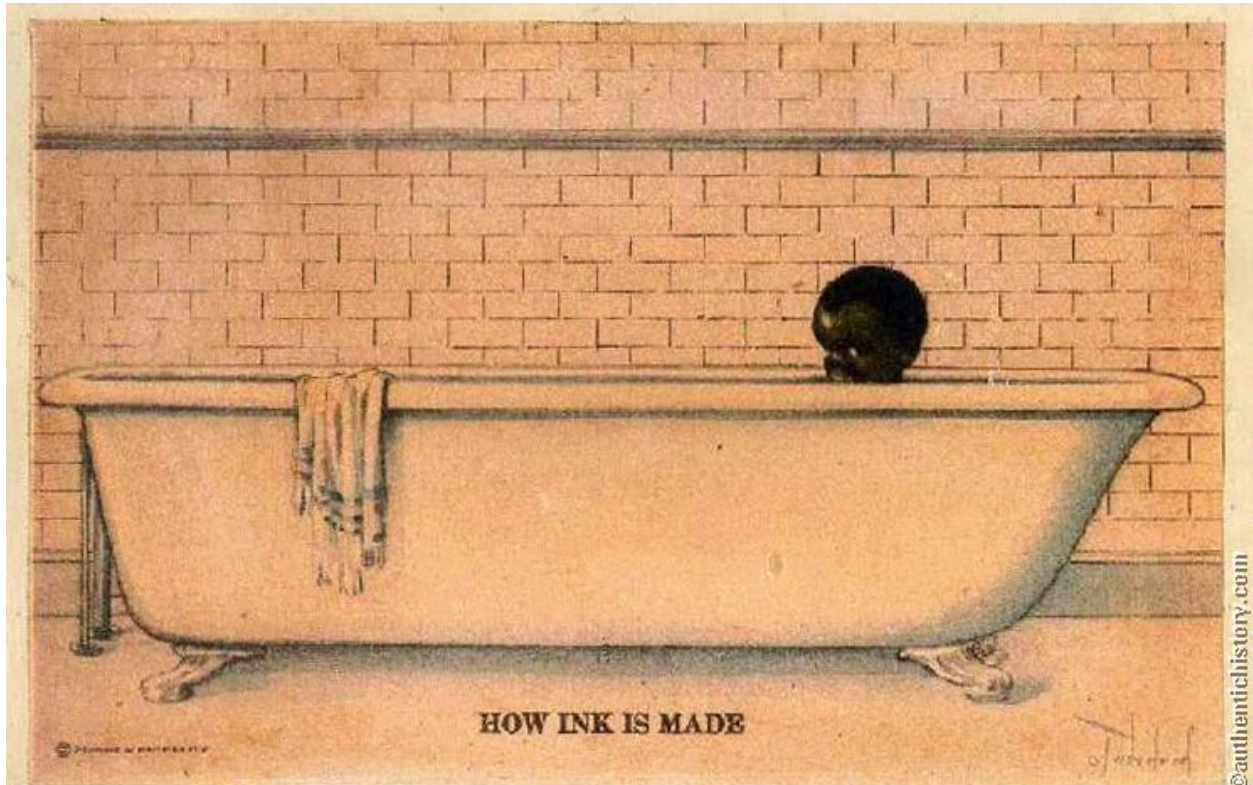
In the sequel to *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, the “black” Cat is described as “bad”, as well as not belonging in the white family’s home: ““Oh-oh!” Sally said. “Don’t you talk to that cat. That cat is a bad one, That Cat in the Hat. He plays lots of bad tricks. Don’t let him come near”” (Seuss, 1958). When the Cat enters the house, the white male child gets angry and yells, “Cat! You get out!...I can’t have you in here Eating cake like a pig! You get out of this house! We don’t want you about” (Seuss, 1958). The “black” character, already depicted as an animal himself, is further dehumanized by the white child when he is berated for “eating cake like a pig!”

The white male child then drains the bath the Cat is in and exclaims, “And then I SAW THE RING! A ring in the tub! And, oh boy! What a thing! A big long pink cat ring! It looked like pink ink! And I said, “will this ever Come off? I don’t think”” (Seuss, 1958)!



The cat leaving a ring of ink in the bathtub is very racially significant. There are historical racial connotations of ink references to Blackness. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, American

advertisements and postcards featured black children getting their skin color from drinking ink. The message conveyed was (and *continues to be* through this book) that black people/black children/black babies are not human, their Blackness is “unnatural” (white is the default/natural skin color), and that Blackness can be washed off. Below is an almost identical reference to the bathtub scene in *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*. It depicts a Black person leaving “ink” in the bathtub and was featured on a postcard in the 1920s:



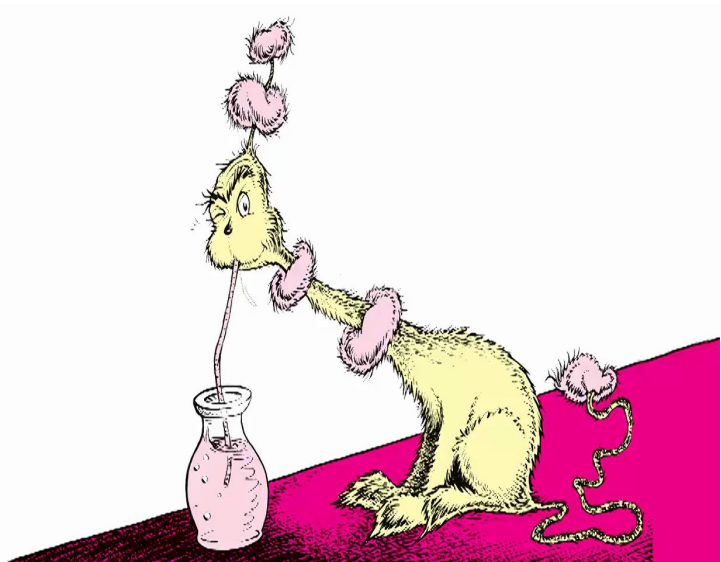
The story continues with the Cat wiping his ink on the white children’s mother’s white dress, the wall, their dad’s shoes, the hallway rug, and their dad’s bed. To clean up the ink all over the house, the Cat takes 26 “Little Cat’s” out of his hat to help. These Cats leave even more ink in their path until all the snow outside of the house is pink. The children yell, “All this does is make MORE spots! Your cats are no good. Put them back in the hat” (Seuss, 1958). The story concludes when “Little Cat Z” is able to remove all the ink and return everything to its desired “white” state (“Now your snow is all white! Now your house is all right” (Seuss, 1958)!

It is important to not only look at the use of racist symbols here, but also to look at what Seuss does with the racism: It is not until everything is returned to “all white” that the house is “all right”. Whiteness is the desired “natural” state and associated with “right”, “clean” and “good”.

In another one of Dr. Seuss’s children’s books, there is an actual reference to a character drinking ink. The book *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, depicts a “Yink” drinking ink with the text, “He likes to drink and drink and drink / the thing he likes to drink is ink. / The ink

he likes to drink is pink. He likes to wink and drink pink ink. / SO if you have a lot of ink, then you should get a Yink I think”.

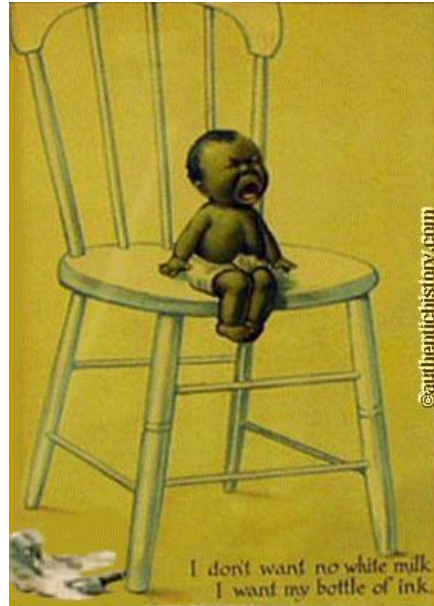
Below is a 1916 magazine advertisement⁸ of a Black baby drinking ink. The caption reads: “N***** milk”. The image of the “Yink” drinking ink from *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* mirrors the advertisement, almost identically:



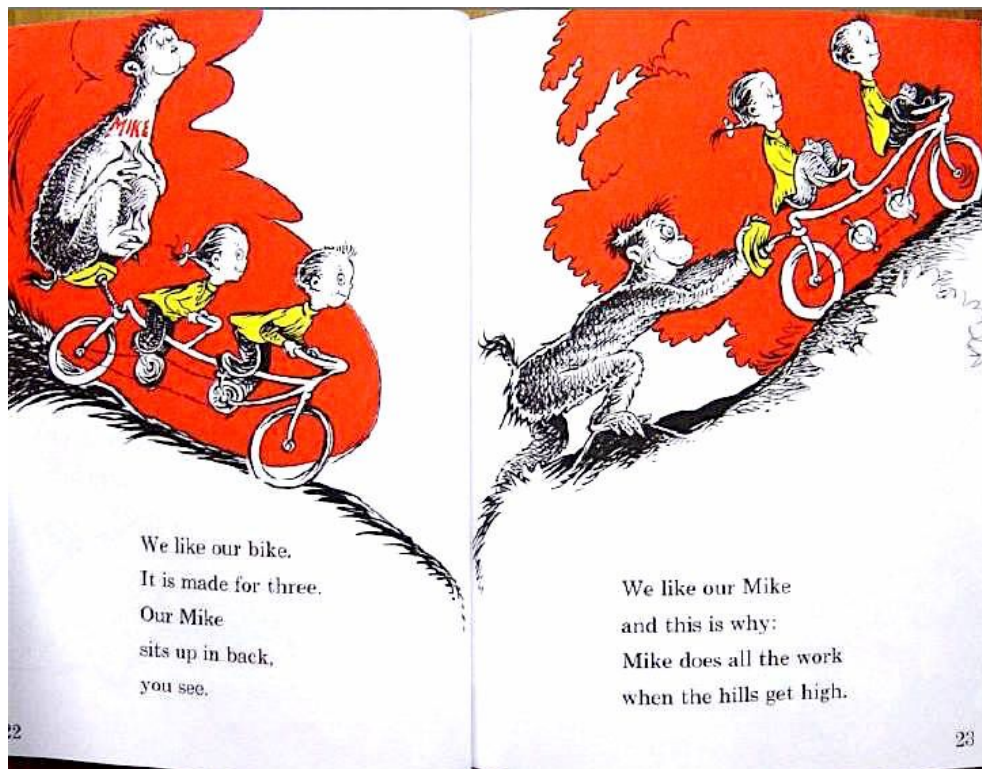
The Seussville website actually has a recipe for a “[Pink Ink Yink Drink](#)” “for everyone who likes to drink and wink like the Yink”.

The following cartoon from the 1920s is another reference to Black babies drinking ink. It shows a Black baby crying, and is captioned: “I don’t want no white milk. I want my bottle of ink”.

⁸ Copyright Morris & Bendien



Wagner (2016) has done an analysis on multiple animal characters in *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* symbolizing Black people and Black/white relations, including the reference of the Yink drinking ink, characters depicted as not being able to read, riding in the “back of the bike”, pushing white children on a bike up a hill (“We like our Mike and this is why: Mike does all the work when the hills get high”), and boxing “the great white hope” (see [Wagner, 2016](#)). This is the page featuring the character “Mike”, which has been suggested as being a reference to Black people riding in the back of the bus and being subservient to white children:



Implications for Youth

In his book chapter on *The Cat in the Hat*, Dr. Nel discusses why people don't automatically recognize *The Cat in the Hat's* racialized origins: “[it] flows stealthily into children’s culture [where] the argument appears racially innocent. This appearance of innocence provides a cover under which otherwise discredited racial ideology survives and continues, covertly, to influence culture” (Nel, 2017). When a Black person or “minstrel” is drawn as a “Cat”, or the color of “ink” is switched from black to “pink”, it disguises the racialized symbols. However, the racialized (and racist) references are there, and they are significant. The “Cat” may ostensibly be a cat, but he looks like, acts like, and is treated like, a minstrel (or dehumanized Black man). The Cat was appropriated from the image of a Black woman, enacts anti-Black references from American culture, and was created from the imagination of a man who performed in his own minstrel shows in blackface.



Each time someone dresses up as *The Cat in the Hat*, anti-Black racism and cultural appropriation is reinforced, and the legacy of blackface and minstrelsy lives on. If the NEA continues to encourage children to “dress up” as the “Cat”, it sends a message that:

1. Performing racist caricatures and stereotypes (including blackface) is not only celebrated and normalized, it is *expected* (by the NEA, their teachers and public school)
2. Cultural appropriation is acceptable: It is okay to take the likeness of a Black person (without their permission) and “perform”/profit off of it, without giving compensation or credit to Black people or Black culture
3. Black people are “other”, dirty, chaotic; b) performers for (and subservient to) white people; c) and, not “right”/suitable/acceptable for white spaces

Critical Analysis of Themes of “Tolerance” and “Anti-Racism in *The Sneetches* and *Horton Hears a Who!*

When people point to the work Dr. Seuss did to promote “tolerance” and “anti-racism”, they often cite the books, *The Sneetches* and *Horton Hears a Who!* Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance uses *The Sneetches* in their [anti-racist curriculum](#) for children and the oft-quoted line from *Horton Hears a Who!*, “A person’s a person, no matter how small!” is proclaimed as a moral of “tolerance”. Both books feature only animals or made-up, non-human characters, so these stories are told through allegories and symbolism. Each book is examined critically to assess if and how they convey messaging around “tolerance” and “anti-racism”.

The Sneetches

Dr. Seuss first published *The Sneetches* in *Redbook* in 1953. A friend told Seuss it was “anti-Semitic” so he put it aside, but Random House compelled him to revise the book and it was published in 1961 (Nel, 2017).

In the book, *The Political Philosophy Behind Dr. Seuss’s Cartoons and Poetry: Decoding the Adult Meaning of a Children’s Text*, author Earnest Bracey describes the plot:

“In an effort to be more like the dominant Sneetches, the Plain-Belly Sneetches take action to ‘remake’ themselves through the magical machinations of a visiting outsider, a salesman named Sylvester McMonkey McBean...Afterward, when the fantastic deed is done, the disparaged and formerly Plain-Belly Sneetches happily and boisterously proclaim “We’re exactly like you! You can’t tell us apart. We’re all just the same now! And now we can go to your frankfurter parties” (Bracey, 2015, p. 189).

The “oppressed” Plain-Belly Sneetches are portrayed as depressed and self-hating, wanting to look and be exactly like the Star-Belly Sneetches. The text in the book reads, “While the Plain-Belly Sneetches were moping and dopping alone on the beaches, just sitting there wishing their bellies had stars” (Seuss, 1953).

Bracey underscores this point: “And if it is also true that the Plain-Belly Sneetches are uncomfortable and ambivalent about their separate existence, would it be surprising to think that they perhaps hate themselves” (Bracey, 2015, p. 185).

While *The Sneetches* is metaphorical and does not contain human characters, it is taught in schools (and homes) as “anti-racist” and necessitates examination through a racial lens.

The Sneetches fails in being “anti-racist” for several reasons: One is that it portrays the “oppressed” in a deficit-based framework. The Plain-Belly Sneetches are depicted as “moping and dopping” in their self-hatred and spend all their time, energy and resources trying to be exactly like the dominant Star-Belly Sneetches. This is a very problematic and misguided way of perceiving oppressed groups. Oppressed communities are generally fighting to hang on to their own culture and identity and not have it erased, marginalized or appropriated by the dominant culture. Oppressed people want to be free of oppression, they do not want to *be* their oppressor.

Of those within oppressed communities who do experience self-hatred, it is the direct result of their oppression -- of whiteness being upheld as the “default” culture that all “others” are conditioned to conform and assimilate to. Oppressed groups are bombarded by a *system* of white supremacy that equates white with “right”, “good”, “intelligent”, “beautiful”, “successful”, “pure” and “innocent,” and positions all “others” as “bad”, “wrong”, “dirty”, “exotic”, “ugly”, and “stupid”. *The Sneetches* touches on the feelings of superiority of the Star-Belly Sneetches over the Plain-Belly Sneetches, but it does not acknowledge any form of institutional or systemic racism that perpetuates the oppression of people of color.

Also, note that the Plain-Belly Sneetches never challenge their oppressor or the oppression itself. They never resist. The only action they take is to disregard their own identity and culture to take on the one of their oppressor. The Plain-Bellied Sneetches play out a misguided scenario of overcoming the intentional discrimination of individual Star-Bellied Sneetches through conformity and colorblindness. There is no acknowledgement, critique, or resistance to institutional racism and the broader conditions of racial inequality.

The book concludes with the Plain-Belly Sneetches and Star-Belly Sneetches getting confused as to who is oppressed and who is the oppressor, and they have “no choice” but to accept each other: “Changing their stars every minute or two. They kept running through/ Until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew / Whether this one was that one...or that one was this one / Or which one was what one...or what one was who...That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars And whether they had one or not, upon thars” (Seuss, 1953). In reality, no matter how hard a person of color may try to look or act white, they can never be white (nor mistaken to be white). This promotes the false narrative that colorblindness/“not seeing race” is the solution to racism.

Implications for Youth

This book may reinforce the following messages in youth:

1. People of color are uncomfortable, unhappy and self-hating about their “separate” existence and won’t be happy/“un-oppressed” until they can look and be exactly like white people.
2. Institutional racism itself does not need to be named, challenged or resisted.

3. If people of color work hard to look and be white, eventually white people will forget/"not see" that they are a person of color and accept them.
4. The colorblind framework of "not seeing race" is the solution to racism.

Dr. Seuss did not write this book with the intention of it being anti-racist. When taught as an allegory for race relations, *The Sneetches* perpetuates white supremacy and reaffirms racism through its degrading, deficit-based narratives about people of color; failure to acknowledge the institutional systems and power structures of oppression, domination and discrimination; and, promotion of a colorblind framework.

Horton Hears a Who!

The book *Horton Hears a Who!* is another one of Dr. Seuss's books widely cited as promoting "tolerance". Many people infer that it is an apology for his WWII anti-Japanese propaganda. This book is problematic in its promotion of the White Savior Complex.

Everyday Feminism discusses the White Savior Complex and why it is harmful:

"A White Savior is a common trope used in books, films, and as a way of interpreting actual history. It's also a perspective shared by many white people as we move through the world. In the simplest terms, it's when a white character or person rescues people of color from their oppression. The White Savior is portrayed as the good one, the one that we're meant to identify with as we watch or read these narratives. They usually learn lessons about themselves along the way. There are many problems with this kind of narrative, some of which I'll go over. For instance, it racializes morality by making us consistently identify with the good white person saving the non-white people who are given much less of an identity in these plot lines. It also frames people of color as being unable to solve their own problems. It implies that they always need saving, and that white people are the only ones competent enough to save them. This is very obviously untrue, and it's a harmful message to relay. Considering how widespread the story is, the result is that it ignores the reality that communities of color have their own leaders and they're not being saved by white people. It also exoticizes the (other) people and positions them as being automatically broken and needing saving, just because of where they live or how they look" (Edell, 2016).

Some of the quotes from the text, which position Horton as the "savior" of the tiny, oppressed "Who's", and reinforce the White Savior Complex, include:

"...some poor little person who's shaking with fear that he'll blow in the pool. I'll just have to save him. Because after all, A person's a person no matter how small" (Seuss, 1954).

"I can't let my very small persons get drowned! I've got to protect them. I'm bigger than they" (Seuss, 1954).

"You're a very fine friend. You've helped all us folks on this dust speck no end. You've saved all our houses, our ceilings, our floors. You've saved all our churches and grocery stores...We Who's are all thankful and grateful to you" (Seuss, 1954).

Just like in *The Sneetches*, this book positions the "oppressed" in a deficit-based framework. The Who's are "helpless" and need to be "saved" and protected by the bigger, more powerful "savior", Horton. Note that Horton is the one who decides that the Who's need to be saved in the first place, and that he himself defines and dictates the actions needed to save "them" (including when he directs the Who's to prove their existence). The Who's don't speak a word to Horton until page 18 of the book, yet Horton starts his work of "saving them" on page 3.

Another problematic aspect of this story is the insistence on the Who's having to *prove* their existence so they won't be killed. Horton commands the Mayor of the Who's: "You've got to prove now that you are really there!...And you very small persons will not have to die / If you make yourselves heard!" The responsibility of whether or not the Who's get killed is placed on the Who's themselves, not their aggressors. There is no action taken to challenge or defend against the violent threats of the kangaroos and monkeys. As in today's racial context, people of color are forced to prove their right to life and that their lives "matter", and white perpetrators of violent crimes against them are often not held accountable.

Implications for Youth

This book may reinforce the following in youth:

1. People of color and/or oppressed groups need to be saved
2. People of color and/or oppressed groups need to be saved by white people (the dominant group)
3. White people get to decide, define and dictate what it means to "save" people of color
4. People of color and/or oppressed groups are "thankful and grateful" to their "white saviors"
5. People of color need to prove their right to life and that their lives matter

Dr. Seuss actively supported and fueled the racism, incarceration and killing of Japanese and Japanese Americans, which had harmful, intergenerational impacts on Japanese people. He was quoted as saying, "If we want to win, we've got to kill the Japs...we can get palsy-walsy afterward with those that are left". The damage done cannot be reversed or mitigated with an allegory that attempts to rewrite the reality of what actually took place and promotes a white

savior narrative. Dr. Seuss and Dr. Seuss Enterprises profited profoundly off of the sales of this book, it's Broadway rendition, the *Horton Hears a Who!* movie (which grossed \$297 million dollars) and associated merchandise. None of it went to the Japanese community, including those [still impacted by cancer and leukemia](#) from the atomic bomb blasts. There were a lot of possibilities for Dr. Seuss to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and make amends for his racist actions and work. However, Geisel made the choice to never directly apologize for his anti-Japanese propaganda, nor the statements he made calling for Japanese people to be killed.

Additional Articles and Advocacy Work Around Dr. Seuss's Racism and/or Rethinking Him as the Face of Read Across America

Mia Wenjen (aka PragmaticMom), a Harvard graduate and founder of Multicultural Children's Book Day, has been advocating against the use of Dr. Seuss as the face of Read Across America Day for years. This is her most recent post on the issue: [“Is Read Across America A White's Only Literacy Event?”](#)

A pair of 10 and 11 year old siblings used “Dr. Seuss Week” this year to increase awareness of Seuss's racist political cartoons. They created fliers of the anti-Black and anti-Japanese cartoons and attempted to hand them out to their peers. Zoe's peers accused her of spreading false rumors, tore up the fliers in front of her and reported her to the teacher. Rockett's teacher raised her voice in disapproval, confiscated the fliers and reported him to the principal. The incident left Zoe in tears several times in the days that followed. Rockett's teacher emailed the parents and told them that “school is not the appropriate place” to disseminate facts on Seuss's racist works: *Kids Use Dr. Seuss Week to Teach Classmates About His Racist Cartoons* http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kids-use-dr-seuss-week-to-teach-classmates-about-his-racist-cartoons_us_58b99751e4b0b9989417281f

“There would be more than eight pictures in my article, but Dr. Seuss Enterprises (the corporate entity which oversees the licensing and production of all things Seuss) would not grant permission to reprint any images to which it controls the rights. As I've always had good relations with the Seuss people in the past, I asked why. I received no response, but my guess is that the “no” has something to do with the fact that the article addresses Seuss and race. When I wrote the [Seuss bio.](#) for the [Seussville.com](#) website, my original version included commentary on Seuss's racist wartime cartoons — But I was asked to cut that. Since I was writing for a corporate website, I did as I was asked to do. Published in an academic journal (instead of on a corporate website), this new article has the freedom to offer a more complicated, more nuanced reading of Seuss and race: “*Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: Exploring Dr. Seuss's Racial Imagination*” <http://www.philnel.com/2014/06/22/blackcat/>

“Many consider his classic *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* an example of that [celebrating differences] message. But it turns out that a lot of the subtext of *One Fish* says the exact opposite, revealing an underlying racism that the good doctor just couldn't get away from”: “*The Most Racist Thing You Read as a Kid (Was by Dr. Seuss)*”

<http://www.cracked.com/blog/how-dr.-seuss-tried-to-battle-racism-and-failed-horribly/>

The Case for Using Read Across America Day to Celebrate Diverse Books

Children's books provide impressions and messages that can last a lifetime (Santora, 2013), and shape how children see and understand themselves, their homes, communities and world. When children's books center whiteness, erase people of color and other oppressed groups, or present people of color in stereotypical, dehumanizing, or subordinate ways, they both ingrain and reinforce “subtle and explicit lessons about whose lives matter” (Nel, 2017). Children's literature has the power to either reduce or reinforce children's biases during the critical window in development when these biases are flexible and still emerging. This makes children's books “one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the fight against racism” (Irby, 2015).

Current research from Harvard University suggests that children as young as three years old, when exposed to racism and prejudice, tend to embrace and accept it, even though they might not understand the feelings (Harvard University, 2012). By age 3 or 4, white children in the U.S., Europe, and Australia show a preference for other white children (Psychology Today, 2013). By age 5, white children are strongly biased towards whiteness. In contrast, 5 year old Black and Hispanic children do not show the same preference towards their own groups.

Children's books have the capacity to impact these preferences and biases. Social psychologists have used a tool called BEAGLE (Bound Encoding of the Aggregate Language Environment) to show how “culture in the form of written material influences the adoption of stereotypical and racist views” (Irby, 2015). Children's books can literally prime children to be racist (Irby, 2015), but they also have the power to reduce bias and racism. Positive representations of race in children's books can have long-term positive effects on how children perceive themselves and each other. A study by several psychologists indicates that children who read books featuring cross-racial friendships reported greater comfort and interest in playing across difference than children who did not, and those attitudes persisted after the completion of the study (Vezalli, 2012). Reading and talking about diverse characters and authors can help to dispel or prevent prejudice from taking hold, and promote empathy and understanding (Lee & Low, 2015).

When books contain experiences and characters to which children can relate, they foster children's positive self-concept, self-confidence, engagement and reading levels (Erlich, 2015). “When we see people like ourselves in the media, including in fiction, we get a glimpse of who we might become, and we feel validated. We can gain role models and inspiration through literature” (Epstein, 2017).

Dr. Seuss books are the most well-known and probably most-read children's books of our time, in large part because of the exposure they continue to receive in schools across America through

the NEA and Read Across America Day. It has been, in some cases, over 80 years (1st Dr. Seuss book published in 1937) since these books were written, and 20 years since the NEA has been celebrating RAA Day on Dr. Seuss's birthday. In 2014, children of color became the majority in America's K-12 public schools and this majority will only continue to grow. It's time to reconsider the impact that these books have on today's youth (and in today's context), and be aware of, and intentional about, who and what is being celebrated and upheld in education (and for whom).

The National Education Association has a powerful opportunity to use Read Across America Day to not only promote a love of reading, but to be a leader in using books to celebrate the diversity of its 45 million annual participants, foster safe and inclusive spaces in classrooms across the country and support positive identity development, cultural pride and empowerment for millions of youth. The diverse books highlighted through NEA's 2016-17 Read Across America Calendar are a step in the right direction, but they don't fully honor or reflect the diversity of students; and Read Across America Day remains focused on Dr. Seuss. Beyond a celebration and focus on Dr. Seuss's books, Read Across America Day is often observed as a week-long celebration of Dr. Seuss's birthday and the man himself. Regardless of what we think about Dr. Seuss/Theodor Geisel as a person, or our perceptions of what the historical and cultural context was when he was alive, the books themselves need to be looked at for the racism (and xenophobia) they are reinforcing and the impact they have on today's youth.

Alternatives to Dr. Seuss: Diverse Children's Book Authors that Can be Celebrated for Read Across America Day

There are many children's book authors whose books can be used to inspire a lifelong love of reading and whose lives themselves can (and do) inspire youth. These are some of the *many* children's book authors that can be used as anti-racist, anti-oppressive alternatives to Dr. Seuss. This list is not comprehensive, but includes a selection of African American, Indigenous, Muslim, Caribbean, African, Latinx, Asian, Jewish, immigrant, trans, autistic, gender non-conforming and deaf authors:

Edwidge Danticat: <http://www.edwidedanticat.com/>

William Kamkwamba: <http://www.williamkamkwamba.com/>

Kadir Nelson <http://www.kadirnelson.com/>

Grace Lin <http://gracelin.com/>

Jacqueline Woodson <http://www.jacquelinewoodson.com/>

Jason Reynolds <http://www.jasonwritesbooks.com/>

Walter Dean Myers <http://walterdeanmyers.net/>

Joseph Bruchac <http://josephbruchac.com/>

Hena Khan <https://www.henakhan.com/>

Rukhsana Khan <http://www.rukhsanakhan.com/>

Yuyi Morales <http://www.yuyimorales.com/>

Kwame Alexander <http://kwamealexander.com/>
Angie Thomas <http://angiethomas.com/>
Matt de la Peña <http://mattdelapena.com/>
Ilyasah Shabazz <http://www.ilyasahshabazz.com/>
Carole Boston Weatherford <https://cbweatherford.com/>
Andrea Davis Pinkney <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/authors/andrea-davis-pinkney/>
Innosanto Nagara <http://www.aisforactivist.com/>
Cheryl Kilodavis: <http://myprincessboy.com/>
Darius Brown: <http://www.iamdariusbrown.com/default.aspx>
Misty Copeland <http://mistycopeland.com/>
Cece Bell <https://cecebell.wordpress.com/>
Linda Sue Park: <http://www.lindasuepark.com/>
R.J. Palacio <http://rjpalacio.com/>
Jazz Jennings <http://www.transkidspurplerainbow.org/>
Ezra Jack Keats <http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org/>
Katie Yamasaki: <http://www.katieyamasaki.com>

Appendix

Select Comments Received From the Initial Article, [“Why My Read Across America Day Was Different”](#)

The initial article received many comments across the various platforms it was shared upon. This is a selection of some of the comments which give insight into how some people responded and foresight into how they may respond to next year's Read Across America Day (the article was published the day after RAA Day 2016). Please note that this article was focused solely on the racist political cartoons (it did not discuss the racism within Seuss's children's books), and some of the comments are responses to other people's comments and not to the article itself:

“The tendency for white people, especially those invested in their “cultural whiteness”, to forgive and forget the evils underpinning their cultural pillars is legendary. There is very little spiritual or moral reflection on the rights and wrongs, or the historical impact of whiteness on the rest of humanity. They will sweep his past under their rug until they are good and ready to throw him under the bus. And not before. At which point they will deny they ever considered him as a reasonable educator for their children.”

“I will not be posting about Seuss anymore – and not including his books in photos on social media, etc. There are just too many amazing children's books out there to promote and honor. We need to promote those books that empower all kids – and that we can be proud of.”

“If you are honest, you must tell the truth. If you are an African American teacher, have a meeting with the principal to express your concerns. Teachers often do not address racial issues in fear of losing their jobs. This matter may include all teachers. I use teachers exclusively because they are the ones who children emulate and admire. There is not enough space to discuss this subject in depth. There is a celebration at most schools honoring many bigoted persons but he happens to be “loved” by children all over the world! I am definitely going to inform parents with whom I am acquainted. I feel very betrayed by my own ignorance. I heard this story but failed to do the research. Another hero bites the dust.”

“what do you do now? I'm a Hebrew science teacher & at my school, they expect the WHOLE SCHOOL to complete dr. Seuss activities throughout the day.”

“If you haven't seen I am not your negro by James Baldwin you really should the movie/documentary. Because part of the problem is white people do in fact get to pick and choose what they see and don't see what they know and don't know. It is in fact possible for a white person to retreat into a white bubble of life that does not include other people suffering or knowledge of how things happen and that's a choice. And this is the problem the way people can live their entire lives ignorant of other people's pain and experience. I think there's a line from I'm not your negro that says they can be born and live and die in that dream the dream that people of color can never access. It gets to the heart of the problem we still have in the United States and around the world. White supremacy allows a sort of blissful ignorance.”

“Your lack of understanding and sensitivity to the real effects of white supremacy are on full display here. Not that bad? Really? My mother who is a nurse had to walk into a home of a client in 2012 filled with the same racist iconography you see here by the oft lauded Dr. Seuss. My mother grew up seeing whites only signs. Her eldest sister played with those four little girls blown up in a Birmingham Alabama church. You have no idea the effect that this imagery still has on people all these years later. This is not poorly drawn portraits, this is and was the dehumanization of people solely based on racism and white supremacy. Your argument makes no sense, how can you “depersonalize” a group of people without putting them down? This was sooooo much more than a put down. But we are used to people whitewashing history. I hope that his racists cartoons are displayed just as prominently as the rest of his works.”

“This does not make sense. If he was just depicting racial relation of that time then he would not have drawn the African Americans as monkeys. He would have drawn colored people. Also he would not have said that in order for America to win, they need “to kill the japs.””

“So although it was a different time, we are not far removed from the effect they can have or the fact that they can be passed down and still fester in present day society.”

“That’s all well and good if only these kind of thoughts did not still exist in the world...Racism is very real and very much surface. It is not a sentiment of a bygone age. It’s today, right now, current...”

“I will not dismiss Dr. Seuss’ racism because it was common at the time. There were many many of his white contemporaries who did not share his racism. He decided to be a racist...anytime anything is written or photographed and circulated, it is timeless. Therefore, it has the ability to not only impact the author/artist, but the public at large.”

“As a white teacher, and a mom who read Hop on Pop and Fox in Sox a gazillion times, I am pleading with all white people who love Dr. Seuss to acknowledge that this IS “that bad”. We have a moral obligation to educate ourselves about what roles our heroes and role models have played in upholding white supremacy and we HAVE to work consciously and tirelessly to dismantle it.”

“Agreed!!! I too am from the same area. Now knowing, my child will miss Dr. Seuss week at school next year.”

“Oh how I wish this wasn’t true! But isn’t that white privilege to try sweeping these stories under the rug? I must pass along even what I find difficult.”

“Having grown up with and still enduring daily the stress of Whites who stereotype, are hostile, disparage, demean, target, and worse, and then deny those behaviors...to reduce those ways of behaving towards others as being merely “imperfect in our common struggle to mature” feels to me like a slap. And I have to wonder if you would be as glib about such hate and abuse if that was the reality of your own daily life? AND against which you had to fight to raise (protect) your children? It seems to me that the minimizing of such behaviors (as that’s how I see your response) is what allows these behaviors to continue in our country like an untreated cancer.”

“My son started reading at age two and a half from “Hop On Pop”. I’ll never be able to touch another Dr. Seuss book.”

“I am disappointed to learn of Dr. Seuss’s disgusting past, as I was to learn about Walt Disney’s earlier. I am sure that many, if not most, icons from the past, upon closer inspection, have clay feet.”

“Actual ‘damage’ was done to Japanese Americans as a direct result of this man’s propaganda.”

“Moving on, as so many people want to do, is not accomplished by covering up injustices and hurtful actions of the past. It is accomplished by being honest, addressing those injustices and hurtful actions, renouncing them, and doing our best to make things right with those we have hurt. Trying to move on without doing that heaps on more hurt. It’s like saying to a kid who has been punched, to stop whining and forgive the person who punched them, before their wounds have been tended to, the bleeding stopped, or an apology offered.”

“For someone who grew up with Dr. Seuss as a kid, the hurt would be a lot less if the author had come out and renounced the hurtfulness of his past work directly. That did not happen”

“This is instructive, something we can all learn from. We suspect from his later works, that this children’s author may have had at least some change of heart (to what extent, we can’t know for sure, there are some positive indications in his later works, but we do know it had not gotten to the stage or point where he felt the need to directly renounce or apologize). But the wound is left festering because instead of addressing it directly, instead of coming out and directly renouncing and seeking to repair the damage of his words and drawings, it was left unspoken, ignored, perhaps kind of implied but with never the clarity or directness required to heal such damage.”

“Imagine the power to heal, of us admitting and renouncing injustice and racism wherever it pops up... including and especially in our own thoughts, words, or actions, and those of our heroes, leaders, or other people or institutions we hold in esteem, when we learn better. To stop worrying about protecting images and egos, be able to form proper apologies that start with recognizing the wrong done, and start worrying more about what those who are hurt need, than sweeping things under the rug without properly addressing them. Reluctance to do so acts as roadblocks to improving things and moving on.”

“To try to white-wash heroes and our past (or ourselves and our present) does not protect children. It allows the pain to continue on. What is more hurtful to a child...to know the painful truth of our past but be comforted that it is recognized as wrong, and that those sorts of things are firmly renounced by their community...OR to find that this is the truth of our past, but it is swept under the rug dismissively, to the point that their peers may be unaware and think that the reality of racism and its effects in our country are blown way out of proportion, because they are literally ignorant of our history (and thus are susceptible to believing or supporting racist policies or attitudes)?”

“What is better for my kids who are in a position of privilege? To have a good example of how to acknowledge racism and wrongs? To gain some understanding of the reality that they and

their friends live in a world where there is a painful history of racism behind so much in this country, that we are working to try to heal from, and give them a leg up in being able to be a part of making things better? Or to allow them to find they have been living in a filtered bubble that has blinded them to reality at the expense of their friends and their own opportunity to live more in accordance with their values?"

"The sad part about this entire thread is that people wanted to jump on someone for telling someone else not to be blind and willfully ignorant. Also everyone in history that was white was not a racist. There were abolitionists and there were other white people who did not believe in racism or slavery. So to say that just because you were white you must have been racist in that time is ignorant. Hold this man accountable for the things that he did. He was a racist. He was what he was and that is that. Black people and other people of color do not need to look the other way and white people need to stop making excuses for their ancestors. That is exactly how we have the government that we have now. People need to wake up and stop making excuses and stop being so blind as to what is in front of them because it doesn't affect them."

"This is an important article; I think it's crucial for us to look critically even at our cultural heroes and idols and be honest about the way racism has permeated so much of our culture."

"Very sad revelation, but I know he wasn't a friend to children, either. He was very vocal about not liking them very much. It's clear the man had limitations."

"We must make sure that every black teacher and all black parents know about this man and his racism so that we can boycott his work!"

"Let's not forget the economics that accompany racism. Had Seuss's characterization of people of color offended the moral inclinations of advertisers and readers, it either would have been withdrawn with an apology as not reflecting the views of the enlightened editor/publisher, or not published at all. That Seuss was able to continue contributing such blatantly racist propaganda without censure, reflects upon the larger social malaise prevalent in America and other Western democracies. Why would white people be immune and ignorant to other white people's racism existing before 1965? The very fabric of American society was infused with racism, exclusion, and exploitation of people of color. I find it appalling that, even today, many American people are ignorant of America's apartheid system instituted from 1609 until 1965."

Critical Analysis of Race in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books

Book Title	Number of White Characters (approximate)	Number of Characters of Color	Number of Characters of Color Depicted with Problematic Stereotypes	Notes
There's A Wocket in my Pocket	20	0		
The Cat's Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?	50	1	1	"How old do you h
The Foot Book	5	0		
Dr. Seuss's ABC	19	0		
Great Day for Up	175	0		
The Cat in the Hat Comes Back	44	0		
One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish	42	0		There has been cc
Ten Apples Up On Top	0	0		
Oh, The Thinks You Can Think	28	0		
Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!	0	0		
Fox in Socks	6	0		
Hop on Pop	22	0		
The Sneetches	78	0		
Sleep Book	0	0		
Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?	24	0		
The Lorax	7	0		
Oh Say Can You Say	27	0		
Hunches in Bunches	48	0		
You're Only Old Once: A Book for Obsolete Children"	85	0		
Yertle the Turtle	0	0		
Scrambled Eggs Super!	40	2	2	"Ali" with a turban
Oh, the Places You'll Go	92	3	3	Turban-wearing m
On Beyond Zebra	42	2	2	1 "turban-wearing"
The King's Stilts	66	0		
My Many Colored Days	0	0		
I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today	0	0		
Happy Birthday to You	27	0		
How the Grinch Stole Christmas	0	0		
I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew	17	0		
The Cat in the Hat Song Book	39	0		
Green Eggs and Ham	0	0		
Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose	31	0		
Because a Little Bug Went Ka-Choo	141	2	2	2 light brown skin
I Can Read With My Eyes Shut	10	0		
In A People House	3	0		
I Wish I Had Duck Feet	161	0		
Please Remember the First of October	76	0		
The Shape of Me and Other Stuff	55	0		
Would You Rather Be A Bullfrog?	9	0		
McElligot's Pool	22	0		
Wacky Wednesday	166	0		
Horton and the Kluggerbug and More Lost Stories	28	0		
The Bippolo Seed and Other Lost Stories	59	0		
Horton Hears A Who!	0	0		
The Eye Book	35	0		
If I Ran the Zoo	113	23	23	4 Asians with text:
And to Think I saw It on Mulberry Street	97	8	8	The "rajah" he dep
Seuss-isms!	36	0	0	
What Pet Should I Get?	36	0	0	
Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?	114	4	4	4 men with oversiz
	2195	45	45	
50 total books				
2240 total human charaters				
97.99% white characters				
2% characters of color				
100% characters of color depicted in stereotypical ways				

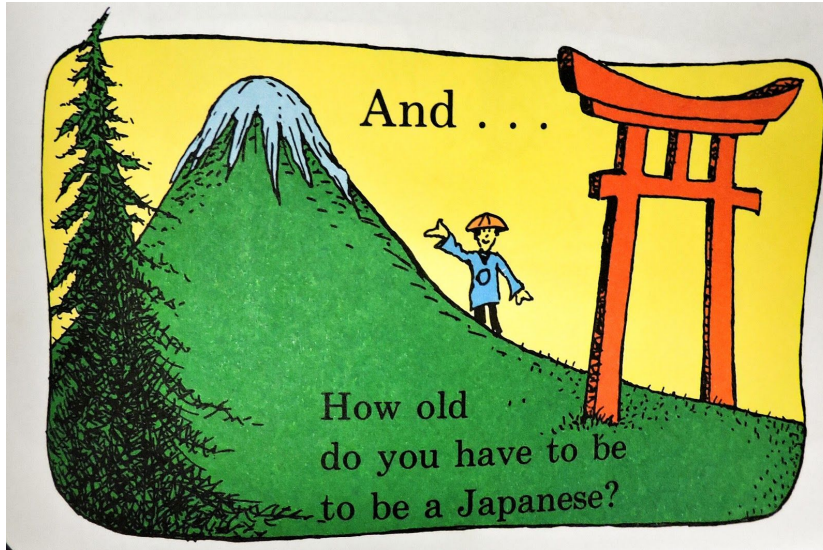
Dr. Seuss Books Featuring Characters of Color

The Cat's Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?

50 white characters; 1 character of color

Character of color:

- “Japanese” man wearing a "rice paddy hat" with bright yellow skin. Book text: "How old do you have to be to be a Japanese?" (stereotypes, exotification, caricature) (1 character depicted 1 time)



Scrambled Eggs Super!

40 white characters, 2 characters of color

Characters of Color:

- A man with an oversized turban with feathers in it, a beard and curled toe shoes, is shown in one scene climbing up the hill with a scared look on his face and being chased by birds in the next. (**subservience, stereotypes, caricature**) (1 character depicted 2 times). "Ali" is "fetching" an egg for the white male child.



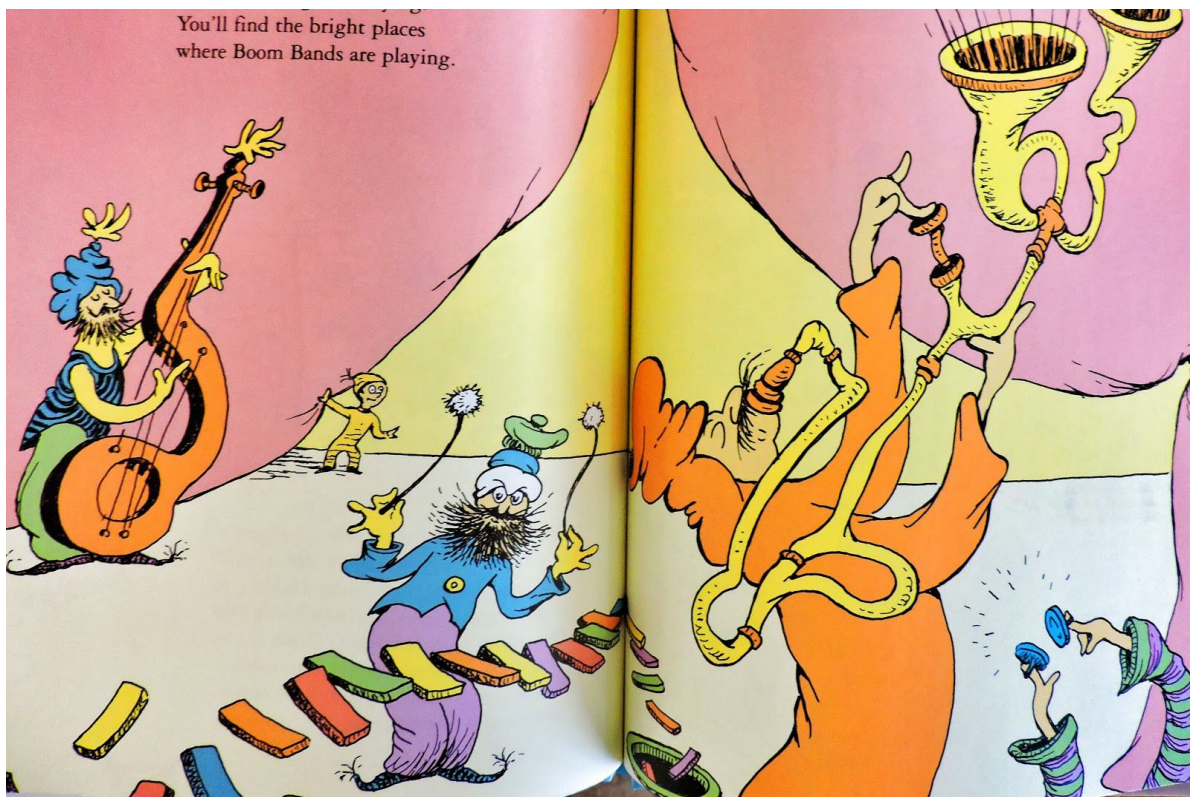


Oh, the Places You'll Go

92 white characters; 3 characters of color

Characters of color:

- “Turban-wearing” men with long beards or mustaches and curled toe shoes playing exotic instruments. (**exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (3 separate characters depicted 1 time)



On Beyond Zebra

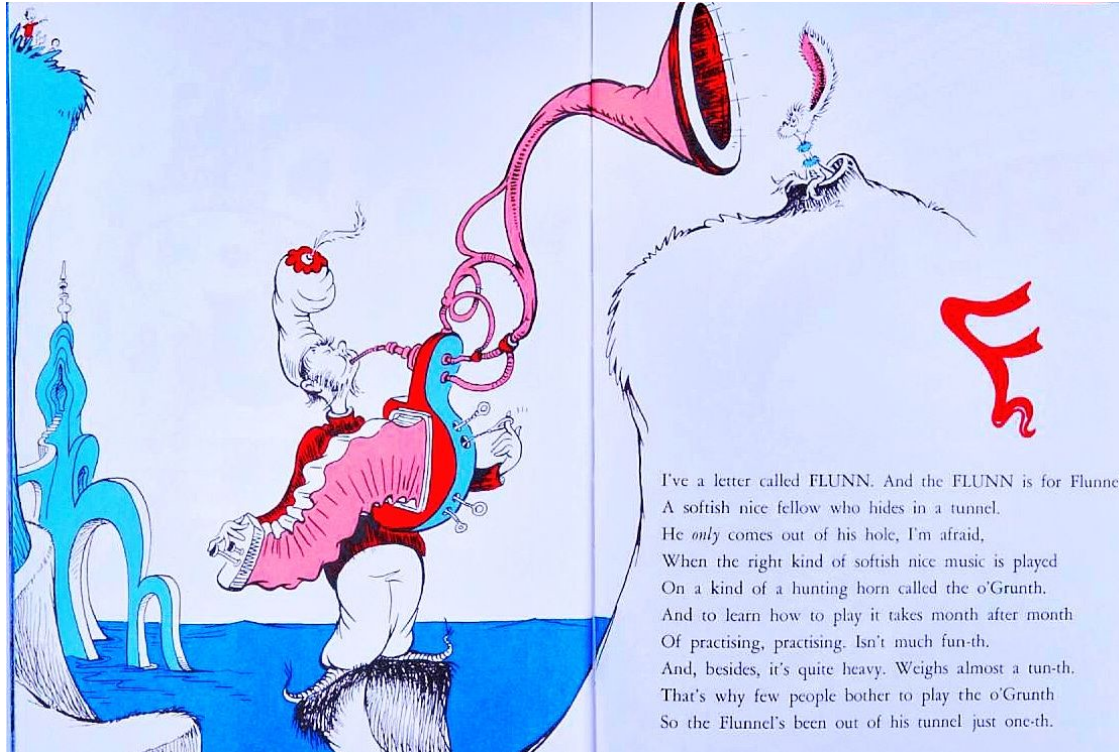
42 white characters; 2 characters of color

Characters of color:

- “Turban-wearing” man referred to as "Nazzim of Bazzim" riding an exotic camel-like animal. (**exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (depicted 1 time)



- One turban-wearing man with curled toe shoes playing an exotic instrument. (**exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (depicted 1 time)



Because a Little Bug Went Ka-Choo

141 white characters, 2 characters of color

Characters of color:

- 2 light brown skinned “turban wearing” characters wearing oversized turbans with feathers in them. One is riding a zebra, the other is riding an elephant. They are both in the circus and drawn as the same color as the ape in the cage and bear carrying a white man on his shoulders. (**dehumanization, exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (2 characters depicted 1 time)

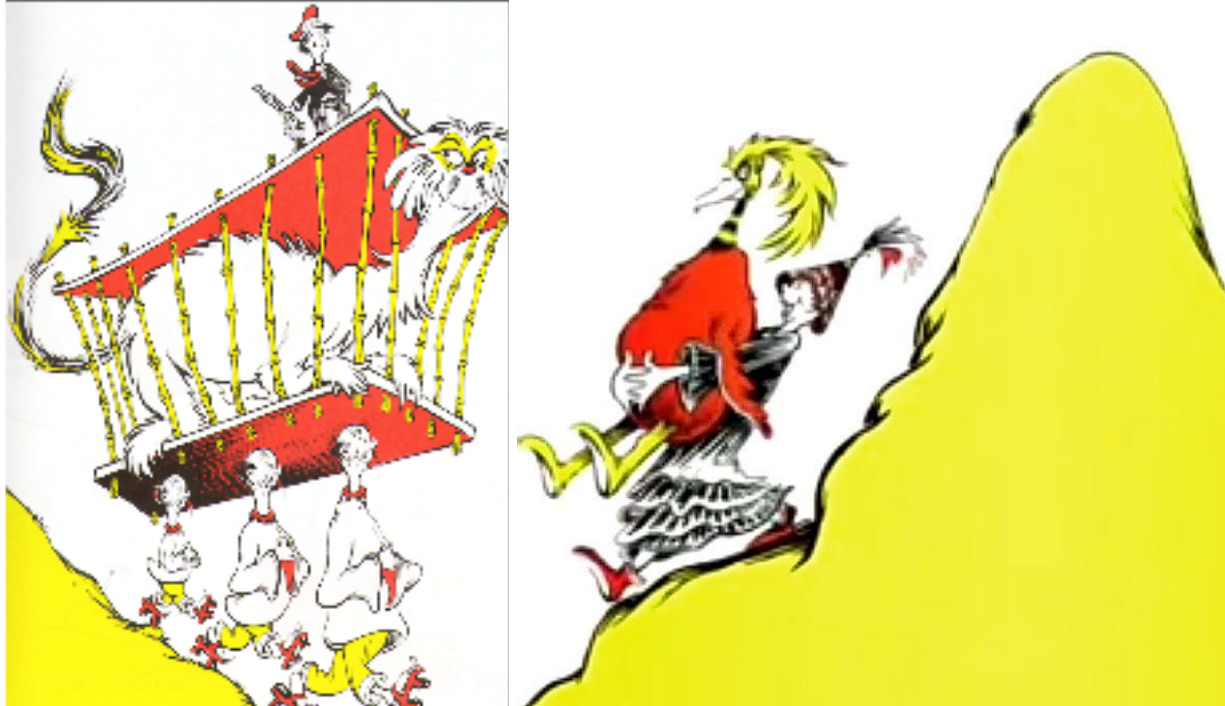


If I Ran the Zoo

113 white characters, 23 characters of color

Characters of color:

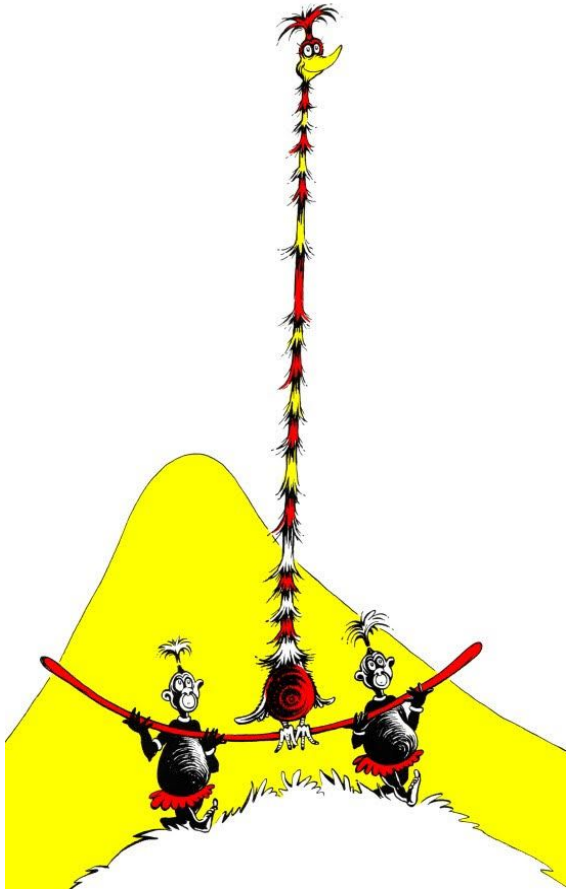
- 4 Asians with text: "I'll hunt in the mountains...with helpers that all wear their eyes at a slant". All are working for the white male child: 3 are carrying the cage with the captured animal and white child on top. They are all wearing "geta" shoes. One is off to the side in a "rice paddy hat" carrying an exotic animal. They are all depicted with "slanted" eyes. (**subservience, stereotypes, caricature**) (4 characters depicted 1 time)



- 2 Asians in "rice paddy hats". One is holding a spear and the text says, "I'll catch them in countries no one can spell. (**exotification, subservience, stereotypes, caricature**) (2 characters depicted 1 time)
- "Turban-wearing" man riding an exotic camel-like animal referred to as a "Mulligatawny". The man has an oversized turban and long mustache. The text reads, "A Mulligatawny is fine for my zoo and so is a chieftain (referring to the turban-wearing man), I'll bring one back too." (**dehumanization, exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (1 character depicted 1 time)



- 2 Africans depicted as monkeys (the same way Seuss depicted Black people in his racist political cartoons). They are wearing what appear to be grass skirts with no shirts, have tufts in their hair matching the hair of the animal they are carrying for the white male child's zoo. Text: "I'll go to the African island of Yerka And bring back a tizzle-topped Tufted Mazurka" (**subservience, exotification, dehumanization, stereotypes, caricature**) (2 characters depicted 1 time)



- 8 "Persians" in turbans, again, carrying animals for the white child. The text reads, "8 Persian princes will carry the basket, but what their names are I don't know so don't ask it." (**exotification, subservience, stereotypes, caricature**). (8 characters depicted 1 time)



- 6 men in "rice paddy hats" capturing an animal for the white male child (6 characters depicted 1 time) (**subservience, stereotypes, caricature**)

And to Think I Saw it on Mulberry Street

97 white characters, 8 characters of color

Characters of color:

- The "rajah" he depicts throughout is wearing a turban with rubies and feathers. He has on curled toe shoes and is riding an elephant the entire time. He and the elephant are pulling a wagon full of white men (**subservience, stereotypes, exotification, caricature**). (1 character depicted 7 times)



- The "Chinese man" is shown with bright yellow skin and slanted eyes. He is running with chopsticks and a bowl of rice in his hands. The caption reads "...A Chinese man Who eats with sticks...." which is the updated version. The original version reads, "a yellow-faced chinamen who eats with sticks". (**exotification, stereotypes, caricature**) (1 character depicted 1 time)



Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?

114 white characters, 4 characters of color

Characters of color:

- 4 men with oversized turbans with long feathers in them, wearing curled toe shoes. All riding camels. The text reads, "And you're lucky indeed you don't ride on a camel..." (exotification, stereotypes, caricature) (4 characters depicted 1 time)

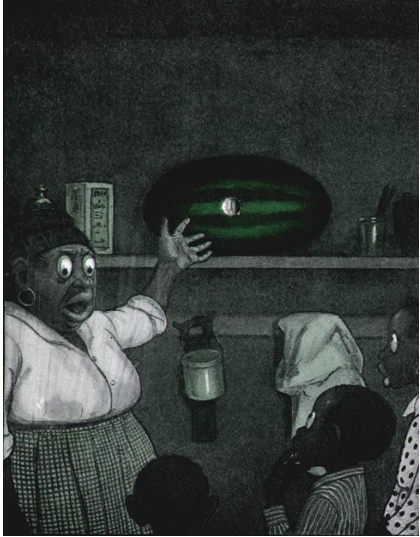


Excerpts from Dr. Philip Nel's Book Chapter, "Was The Cat in the Hat Black?: Exploring Dr. Seuss's Racial Imagination" (to be published by Oxford University Press on July 3, 2017)

“In 1955, Dr. Seuss and William Spaulding—director of Houghton Mifflin’s educational division—stepped into the publisher’s elevator at 2 Park Street in Boston. As Seuss’s biographers tell us, the elevator operator was an elegant, petite woman who wore white gloves and a secret smile (Morgan and Morgan 154). They don’t mention that she was Annie Williams, nor do they say that she was African American (Silvey). Seuss was on that elevator because Spaulding thought he could solve the Why Johnny Can’t Read crisis by writing a better reading primer. When Seuss sketched this book’s feline protagonist, he gave him Mrs. Williams’s white gloves, her sly smile, and her color. However, she is but one African American influence on Seuss’s most famous character. One source for that red bow tie is Krazy Kat, the black, ambiguously gendered creation of biracial cartoonist George Herriman (Cohen 325). Seuss, who admired what he called “the beautifully insane sanities” of Krazy Kat (qtd. in Nel, Dr. Seuss 70), also draws upon the traditions of minstrelsy—an influence that emerges first in a minstrel show he wrote for his high school. The Cat in the Hat is racially complicated, inspired by blackface performance, racist images in popular culture, and actual African Americans. The Cat’s influences help us to track the evolution of the African American cultural imaginary in Seuss’s work, but also, more importantly, to exemplify how children’s literature conceals its own racialized origins.

Decades before the birth of his Cat in the Hat, racial caricature was an accepted part of Theodor Seuss Geisel’s childhood. D. W. Griffith’s acclaimed Birth of a Nation (1915), released the month Geisel turned eleven, offered a popular and racist depiction of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Jazz Singer (1927), the first feature-length “talking picture,” starred Al Jolson in blackface. One of Geisel’s favorite childhood books, Peter Newell’s The Hole Book (1908), follows a bullet’s comically disruptive journey through its pages, including one where a black mammy points to the hole in the watermelon, and addresses, in dialect, a group of wide-eyed black children: ““Who plugged dat melon?” mammy cried, / As through the door she came. / ‘I’d spank de chile dat done dat trick / Ef I could learn his name”” (g. 1). Seuss remembered this book so well that sixty years after reading it, he could still quote its opening verse by heart (Nel, Dr. Seuss 18). If, as Tony Watkins has argued, “books tells stories that contribute to children’s unconscious sense of the ‘homeland’” (193), then these stories may have embedded racist caricature in Geisel’s unconscious, as an ordinary part of his visual imagination.

(Picture from Dr. Seuss’s favorite The Hole Book)



So, it is not surprising that racial caricature emerges in his work—that [Dr. Seuss] wrote “Chicopee Surprised” and acted in it in blackface, at Springfield High School. Seventeen-year-old Ted Geisel performed as one of the members of the jazz quartet, and as one of the blackfaced “end men” (“Minstrels Add \$300 to Fund for Trip”). Seuss’s early cartoons also offer abundant examples of minstrel-like gures, along with many other stereotypes. A 1923 issue of *Jack-o-Lantern*, Dartmouth College’s humor magazine (of which he was editor), had a Ted Geisel cartoon in which two thick-lipped black boxers face off. Playing on the fact that one has a slightly lighter skin tone, the caption reads, “Highball Thompson wins from Kid Sambo by a shade”—with a labored pun on “shade.” For a 1928 issue of *Judge*, carnival-goers throw baseballs at a black man’s head, while the man’s wife berates him: “Out sportin’ again, are yo’, nigger? Jest wait ‘til I lay hands on yo’ tonight.” A 1929 issue of the same magazine offers Seuss’s “Cross-section of the World’s Most Prosperous Department Store,” in which a white salesman directs a white customer to choose one of two-dozen monkey-faced black men. The sign above them reads, “Take Home a High-Grade Nigger for Your Woodpile!”

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Persistence of Racial Stereotypes in Seuss’s Work

Yet stereotypes continued to populate Seuss’s work in the 1950s. In *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), Gerald McGrew proposes going to “the African Island of Yerka” to “bring back a tizzle-topped Tufted Mazurka.” The accompanying illustration depicts the Tufted Mazurka—a “canary with quite a tall throat”—on a perch carried by two African men. Suggesting a kinship with animals, the two Africans are nearly naked, and the tufts on their heads resemble the tuft on the bird’s. Their faces, each adorned with a nose ring, seem to come straight out of Seuss’s early cartoons. His “Africa—Its Social, Religious, and Economical Aspects,” published in March 1929, also

shows round-bellied, wide-eyed black men. More and less subtle stereotyping emerges elsewhere in his 1950s work.

As Michele Abate has suggested to me, Seuss's depiction of the Grinch echoes nineteenth-century caricatures of the Irish. Any influence of ethnic stereotyping here is more subtle than If I Ran the Zoo's visit to "the mountains of Zomba-ma-Tant / With helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant." but the Grinch's face suggests that even as Seuss wrote books designed to challenge prejudice, he never fully shed the cultural assumptions he grew up with. As Barthes, Foucault, Williams, and others have reminded us, this is how ideology works; it's insidious, learned unconsciously, and so can influence us without our being aware of it.

Beneath the guise of their own "innocent" fun and through their association with children, toys and children's books are especially adept at—to borrow a phrase from Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* (2011)—mystifying "racial ideology by hiding it in plain sight" (18). As Bernstein says, "children's culture has a special ability to preserve (even as it distorts) and transmit (even as it fragments) the blackface mask and styles of movement, which persist not only in Raggedy Ann and the Scarecrow but also in the faces and gloved hands of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny" (19). To her list, we can add the Cat in the Hat, whose entry into the story is a visual echo of Dr. Seuss's early cartoon "Four Places Not to Hide While Growing Your Beard" (1929). Indeed, what Eric Lott says of the nineteenth-century minstrel can also be said of Seuss's twentieth-century black cat. The Cat and blackface performers are ambivalent gures, "with moments of resistance to the dominant culture as well as moments of suppression," and they emerge during a struggle over the rights of blacks in America (Lott 18).

Though The Cat in the Hat is not explicitly about integration, it is about a conflict between white children and a black cat whose character and costume borrow from blackface performance. The Cat's umbrella (which he uses as a cane) and outrageous fashion sense link him to Zip Coon, that foppish "northern dandy negro" (Lott 15). His bright red floppy tie recalls the polka-dotted ties of blackfaced Fred Astaire in Swing Time (1936) and of blackfaced Mickey Rooney in Babes in Arms (1939). His red-and-white-striped hat brings to mind Rooney's hat in the same lm or the hats on the minstrel clowns in the silent picture Off to Bloomingdale Asylum (1903). Such garish costumes signal the Cat's and the blackface character's aspiration to and unawareness of bourgeois acceptability.

More often than not, his mouth is open. If, as Ngai suggests, "the mouth functions as a symbolically overdetermined feature in racist constructions of blackness" (116), the Cat's mouth ties him to racial stereotypes: it is open in thirteen out of its eighteen appearances. In the animated cartoon version (1971, teleplay and lyrics by Dr. Seuss), animatedness becomes a kind of racial embodiment when the Cat spreads his white-gloved hands out to his sides, and opens

his mouth wide to sing, "I'll never see my darling / moss-covered three-handled family grudunza anymore." On the final word, he folds his hands, and delivers a look of pathos. His affect and his gestures echo those of Al Jolson singing "Mammy" in *The Jazz Singer*. During the "Cat, hat" song, the Cat's white-gloved gestures and expressive mouth recall the blackface performer.

If we read the Cat as a blackface performer, come to entertain the white children, then his performance is ambiguous—grotesque, powerful, oppressive, unsettling, both blurring boundaries and affirming them. The fish is right when he says to the Cat: "You should not be here / when our mother is not." This "black" cat is creating chaos in this white family's home. Recalling the long cultural history of representing people of color as animals, he is an animal impersonating a human, dressed to the nines and pretending to be a member of the class and race to which he aspires. Inasmuch as their clothes and language emphasize performance, the efforts of the black-face character—and of the Cat—do highlight race and class as social constructs. Though their acting suggests that social class and race are roles, it also invites us to laugh because they cannot perform these roles convincingly. Arguably, a blackface caricature and the Cat falter in their performances because they are essentially different, essentially other.

If I Ran the Zoo and Seuss's other bestiary books—Scrambled Eggs Super! (1953), On Beyond Zebra! (1955), If I Ran the Circus (1956), Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book (1962), and so on—all depend on an exoticized other.

These images appear in his work because Seuss was a cultural sponge. He absorbed everything he saw and reflected these influences in his work (including)...stereotypes of women and people of color. Even as he wrote books designed to challenge prejudice, he never fully shed the cultural assumptions he grew up with, and was likely unaware of the ways in which his visual imagination replicated the racial ideologies he consciously sought to reject.

Contributing to the Cat's dark coloring and strengthening his ties to blackface performance, one of the character's likely ancestors is directly associated with minstrelsy: Harry S. Miller's song, "The Cat Came Back" (1893), a "COMIC NEGRO ABSURDITY" which tells of an old yellow cat who will not leave Mister Johnson's home and, subsequently, will not leave several other places. As the refrain says, the "cat came back for it wouldn't stay away." In the 1893 sheet music, the lyrics are all in an imitation black dialect: "Dar was ole Mister Johnson, he had troubles ob his own; / He had an ole yaller cat that wouldn't leave its home. / He tried eb'ry thing he knew to keep de cat away; / Eben sent it to de preacher, an' he tole for it to stay." Though Seuss never mentions "The Cat Came Back," his sequel *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958) echoes its title, his Cat stories bear strong narrative similarities to the tale of the cat in the song (both are pesky cats who are hard to get rid of), and its prevalence in pop culture make it likely that Seuss would have known it: the song has had many recorded versions (including recent

cover versions by Tom Paxton and Garrison Keillor), has often been referenced in political cartoons and newspapers, and has remained popular enough to inspire an animated cartoon in 1988.

In The Cat in the Hat Comes Back, his prodigious procreative abilities tie him to the myth of African Americans' allegedly abundant sexuality, a trope Seuss exploits in a 1929 cartoon. A black minister addresses a black mother and her five children: "Sorry, sister, but you can't get wholesale baptizin' rates unless you got a minimum of twelve chillun'." She replies, "Well, paw-son, duck these five kids now, and give me credit for seven mo' in the future." If, following Naomi Goldenberg, we read the 26 Little Cats in *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* as the Cat's progeny (sprung, Zeus-like, from his head), then Seuss's feline perpetuates this stereotype (Nel, *Annotated Cat* 130).

An imagination steeped in blackface performance transforms the white-gloved, brown-skinned Mrs. Williams into the white-gloved, black-and-white-skinned (or -furred?) Cat in the Hat. People don't see the Cat's blackface ancestry for the same reason that they don't see Bugs Bunny's, Mickey Mouse's, or the Scarecrow's. These images are so embedded in the culture that their racialized origins have become invisible. As Robin Bernstein says, "when a racial argument is effectively countered in adult culture, the argument often flows stealthily into children's culture [where] the argument appears racially innocent. This appearance of innocence provides a cover under which otherwise discredited racial ideology survives and continues, covertly, to influence culture" (51). This is why contemporary readers don't see the Cat in the Hat's racialized ancestry.

[Another] reason we need to consider the Cat's racial history is that in the 1950s, readers of children's literature saw animal characters as distinctly racialized. In both racist and antiracist children's literature, differences between animals have a long history of representing differences (or similarities) between races. Under this narrative logic, the color of a cat might be an allusion to skin color. In 1959, vocal Southerners accused Garth Williams's *The Rabbits' Wedding* (1958)—in which a white rabbit marries a black rabbit—of promoting integration, and demanded that the book be removed from libraries. In Alabama, State Senator E. O. Eddins said, "This book should be taken off the shelves and burned"; Alabama public libraries removed the book from the open shelves of the children's section, and put it on a closed shelf "reserved for works on integration . . . (circulation by special request only)" ("Of Rabbits" 19). Orlando Sentinel columnist Henry Balch called *The Rabbits' Wedding* "the most amazing evidence of brainwashing I've run across recently" ("Racial Fur Flies" 28). He wrote, "As soon as you pick up the book, you realize these rabbits are integrated. One of the techniques of brainwashing is conditioning minds to accept what the brainwashers want accepted" ("Of Rabbits" 19)

Blackface's legacy lives on in the character of the Cat, and racial stereotypes continue to emerge in Dr. Seuss books—despite the fact that Ted Geisel was a liberal Democrat...the complex relationship between his liberal Democratic politics and his visual style creates work that quietly preserves what it ostensibly opposes.”