

## **The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books**

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## Introduction

Theodor Seuss Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, has sold over 650 million children's books in seventeen languages and ninety-five countries (Wilkens, "Wildly Inventive"). Of the 650 million books, over 450 million have been sold in the twenty-seven years since Dr. Seuss died (Bukspan). Bill Dreyer, Collections Curator for the *Art of Dr. Seuss'* touring exhibitions, told CBS News, "Dr. Seuss is more popular now than he was during his lifetime" (Reynolds). In spite of his first children's book being published over eighty years ago in 1937, Seuss continues to be widely celebrated in American culture, homes, and classrooms as "the most popular children's author in America" (Nel, "Dr. Seuss" 6). According to Herb Cheyette of Dr. Seuss Enterprises, "one out of every four children born in the United States receives as its first book a Dr. Seuss Book" (Nel, "Dr. Seuss" 3).

Before *and during* his career publishing children's books, Dr. Seuss also published hundreds of racist political cartoons, comics, and advertisements for newspapers, magazines, companies, and the United States government. In spite of Dr. Seuss' extensive body of explicitly racist published works dehumanizing and degrading Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and people from other marginalized groups (including Jewish people and Muslims), many differentiate and defend the author's children's books as "promoting tolerance," and even "anti-racist." The book *The Sneetches* has been referred to as "an anti-racism fable" (Nel, "Dr. Seuss" 59) and a "groundbreaking diatribe against bigotry" (Cohen 309). Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching Tolerance* uses *The Sneetches* in their anti-racist curriculum for children in Kindergarten through fifth grade (*Teaching Tolerance*). *Horton Hears a Who!* has been referred

to as “an allegory advocating equal treatment of all people” (Nel, “Dr. Seuss” 54) with the line, “A person’s a person, no matter how small!” frequently cited as a moral of tolerance.

Our study sought to evaluate the claims that his children’s books are anti-racist, and was shaped by the research question: How and to what extent are non-White characters depicted in Dr. Seuss’ children’s books?

We designed our study to provide important insights into the manner and extent to which White characters and characters of color are portrayed, and assess their implications to the development and reinforcement of racial bias in young children. We also assessed the messaging communicated through the racialized non-human characters in *The Cat in The Hat*, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, *The Sneetches*, and *Horton Hears a Who!* These titles were selected because of the use of *The Sneetches* and *Horton Hears a Who!* as anti-racist texts and Philip Nel’s research on the *The Cat in the Hat*’s origins in blackface minstrelsy.

## **Background**

### *Seuss’ History Publishing Racist Works*

In the 1920s, Dr. Seuss published anti-Black and anti-Semitic cartoons in Dartmouth’s humor magazine, the *Jack-O-Lantern*. He depicted a Jewish couple (captioned “the Cohen’s”) with oversized noses and Jewish merchants on a football field with “Quarterback Mosenblum” refusing to relinquish the ball until a bargain price as been established for the goods being sold (Cohen 208). In the same issue of *Jack-O-Lantern*, Seuss drew Black male boxers as gorillas. His cartoons, advertisements, and writings often exhibited explicit anti-Black racism. He consistently portrayed Africans and African Americans as monkeys and cannibals—often holding spears, surrounded by flies, and wearing grass skirts. In *Judge* magazine and *College*

*Humor*, he published over a dozen cartoons depicting Black people as monkeys and repeatedly captioned them as “n\*ggers” (Cohen 212-13). For example, a cartoon Seuss made for *Judge* magazine in 1929 depicts a group of thick-lipped Black men up for sale to White men. The sign above them reads: “Take Home A High-Grade N\*gger For Your Wood Pile” (Cohen 213). Other captions he used with his images of Black people included: “Disgusted wife: ‘You hold a job, Worthless? Say, n\*gger, when you hold a job a week, mosquitos will brush their teeth with Flit and like it!’” (Cohen 213) and “My, my, n\*gger, what an impression youse goin’ to make when you deliver this here wash to my clients” (Cohen 212). In 1928, in the first ever artwork that he signed as “Dr. Seuss,” he drew a racist cartoon of a Japanese woman and children. The caption spells the word “children” as “childlen,” which reflects the stereotype that Japanese people can’t say their “R’s” (Cohen 86). Seuss’ racist depictions of Japanese people has been rationalized by Seuss scholars as “war hysteria,” but this cartoon precedes his anti-Japanese propaganda during World War II by over a decade. The same year, he launched the seventeen-year advertising campaign he created for Flit insecticide that first made him famous (Nel, “Dr. Seuss” 6). Many of these Flit ads featured racist and xenophobic depictions of Arabs, Muslims, and Black people as caricatures or monkeys in subservient positions to White men.

In the 1930s, Dr. Seuss published a “... BONERS” spread in *College Humor* featuring racist depictions of Asians and sexist depictions of women (Cohen 162). He also published an illustration for Dartmouth Outing Club’s program, which featured stereotypical depictions of Indigenous people with large feather headdresses, long pipes, and nearly naked in the snow (Cohen 138). His 1933 spread in *Life* magazine featured Orientalist depictions of men in turbans and men riding camels (Cohen 165), as did his comic strips in the *Sunday American* and *Chicago*

*Herald and Examiner* (Cohen 172). His 1933 political cartoon in *Vanity Fair* depicted “Mexico” as a knife-wielding Mexican man in an oversized sombrero lighting a bomb and an Asian man holding a “Yellow Peril” flag (Cohen 223). Between 1934 and 1936, Dr. Seuss published a series of advertisements for Essomarine Oils & Greases featuring Black people with ape faces or as monkeys and cannibals in grass skirts (Cohen 134, 215). One featured a topless “Negro Mermaid” and Black sailors, all with ape faces (Cohen 215). His dehumanization of Black people continued in a decade in which there were an average of over ten lynchings of Black people per year (Minear 23). In 1937, he started his children’s writing career with his first children’s book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. He published three more children’s books over the next three years, including *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* in 1938, *The King’s Stilts* in 1939, and *Horton Hatches the Egg* in 1940.

Between 1940 and 1942, he created an advertising campaign featuring a series of racist depictions of Native people for the beer company Narragansett. The Narragansett are an actual tribal nation that has been in the northeast more than 30,000 years (The Narragansett). Seuss used the image of a “cigar-store Indian,” named him “Chief ‘Gansett,’” and had him roll around on wheels while serving and pouring beer for White men (Cohen 231). During Thanksgiving, Seuss drew Chief ‘Gansett shooting a turkey with a large gun and captioned it, “Narragansett beer ‘Goes Great Guns with TURKEY!’” (Cohen 230). Between 1941-43, Seuss published over four hundred political cartoons as the chief editorial cartoonist for the New York newspaper, *PM* (Minear 12). Though Seuss had published four children’s books prior to his work for *PM*, he didn’t return to children’s book writing until after World War II. Seuss’ cartoons for *PM* exhibited explicit anti-Japanese racism and depicted Japanese and Japanese Americans as a

violent threat to the United States. Japanese people were drawn with pig snouts, as snakes, monkeys, or cats, and referred to as “Japs” (Minear 65, 106, 108, 118-20, 142-43, 149, 212). They were repeatedly captioned with words that replaced “R’s” with “L’s.” For example, a cartoon of a Japanese man coming out of a box labeled “JAP WAR THREAT” is captioned, “Velly Scary Jap-in-the-Box” (Schiffrin 121). His work dehumanizing and vilifying the Japanese fueled paranoia and suspicion of the entire ethnic group during the war. Six days before President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066—to round up and incarcerate 120,000 Japanese Americans in concentration camps across the United States—Seuss published a cartoon depicting all Japanese Americans on the west coast as saboteurs with explosives in their hands (Minear 65). Another one of his cartoons, published in 1942, depicted John Haynes Holmes, co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and American Civil Liberties Union, beheaded by a Japanese man (Minear 198). Holmes was a pacifist who was opposed to the United States’ entry into the war, which Seuss vehemently supported. When Seuss received criticism for his cartoon of Holmes, he responded:

... right now, when the Japs are planting their hatchets in our skulls, it seems like a hell of a time for us to smile and warble: “Brothers!” It is a rather flabby battle cry. If we want to win, we’ve got to kill Japs, whether it depresses John Haynes Holmes or not. We can get palsy-walsy afterward with those that are left. (Minear 184)

Between 1945 and 1946, Seuss worked for Frank Capra in the army to create films called *Know Your Enemy: Japan* and *Our Job in Japan* (Minear 261). The latter was made to indoctrinate US servicemen to “re-educate” the “backward” Japanese (Minear 262). In 1947, he



returned to children's books with *McElligot's Pool* and published over fifty more before his death in 1991.

### *Children's Books and Children's Racial Attitudes*

Children are able to categorize and express preference by race as early as three months of age (Kelly et al. 31). According to Baron and Banaji, children "report negative explicit attitudes toward out-group members" at age three (53). When exposed to racism and prejudice at this age, they tend to embrace and accept it, even though they might not understand the feelings (Burnett). By age six, White North American children have already developed a pro-White/anti-Black bias (Baron and Banaji 55).

Children's books provide impressions and messages that can last a lifetime, and shape how children see and understand themselves, their homes, communities, and world (Santora). A long history of research shows that text accompanied with imagery, such as books with pictures, shapes children's racial attitudes. 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 internalized racism and White supremacy. Rudine Sims Bishop explains the impact of White-centered narratives on White children in her article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors":

Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In this

country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world — a dangerous ethnocentrism.

The lack of children's books featuring people of color, or featuring inauthentic and monolithic representations of people of color, denies children of color an important source of positive racial identity development (Hughes-Hassell and Cox 211). In his *New York Times* article, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?," author Walter Dean Myers underscored the importance of children of color being able to recognize themselves in stories, have their humanity validated, and their value acknowledged by someone who understands who they are (Myers, "Where Are"). He spoke of the significance of children of color being made "human in the eyes of readers, and especially, in their own eyes" (Myers, "Where Are"). His son, author and illustrator Christopher Myers, wrote a companion article on the effects of invisibility on children of color: "One is a gap in the much-written-about sense of self-love that comes from recognizing oneself in a text, from the understanding that your life and lives of people like you are worthy of being told, thought about, discussed and even celebrated" (Myers, "The Apartheid").

## **Literature Review**

While there have been several books published on the racism in Dr. Seuss' political cartoons and advertisements, there has not been extensive research on the racism within his children's books. There is a particular gap in the research on Seuss' depictions of human

characters of color in his children's books. As Seuss scholar Philip Nel points out in *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*, "thorough critical analyses of Dr. Seuss are a relatively recent phenomenon" (11). To date, there have been several book-length studies of Dr. Seuss, including Ruth K. MacDonald's *Dr. Seuss*, Judith and Neil Morgan's *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel*, Richard H. Minear's *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, and Charles D. Cohen's *The Seuss, the Whole Seuss, and Nothing but the Seuss* (11). These authors have made invaluable contributions to the literature by preserving and documenting Seuss' extensive collection of published works, and their work is cited extensively in this paper. A limitation, however, is that none of the authors represent any of the marginalized groups represented in Seuss' published works. These authors, who appear to be homogeneously White, have normalized, defended, minimized, and even erased examples of racism within their analyses of Seuss' works. For instance, of the book *If I Ran the Zoo*—one of the most egregious in terms of depicting people of color through racist caricatures—Ruth K. MacDonald writes, "Occasional stereotypes of native peoples—potbellied, thick-lipped blacks from Africa, squinty-eyed Orientals—may offend some modern readers, but in general, the book delights readers of several ages at several levels" (71). Minear disregards the racism in the hundreds of cartoons Seuss published for *PM* when he praises "just how good the good Doctor really was: good at communicating his ideas clearly and just plain old-fashioned good. He called 'em as he saw 'em, and most of the time he was on the side of the angels" (7). In a Seuss cartoon that is a play on the expression, "There seems to be a n\*gger in the woodpile," Minear defends: "The term 'n\*gger was clearly pejorative, but the origins of the expression are obscure; it may have meant simply something unexpected" (24). In *The Seuss, the Whole Seuss, and Nothing But the Seuss*, Cohen erases and disregards the impact of Seuss' racist works when he calls Seuss

“ahead of his fellow Americans” in promoting tolerance through his children’s books, and “a pioneer in the fight for equality” (Cohen 221).

This study seeks to address the gap in the literature around depictions of human characters of color across Seuss’ children’s book collection, as well as the gap in scholarship and critical analysis from the perspective of non-White researchers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks used to guide this study consist of critical literacy and critical race theory. Critical literacy encourages students and readers to look deeper into a text and analyze its social and cultural implications (Hall and Piazza 32). Texts and imagery communicate about power, race, and gender, who should receive privileges, and who has been or continues to be oppressed (Hall and Piazza 32). Critical race theory provides a lens that exposes how structural intersections, for example race and gender, impact policy, law, and the experiences of privileged and underprivileged communities. Critical race theorists, who might also consider themselves scholar activists, value and include oppressed communities’ experiential knowledge which is often silenced in academia (Stovall 97). The knowledge arising from a scholar activist practice is a perspectival/situated knowledge, one which utilizes academic privilege to address the problematics of social change (Conway 16).

### **Positionality**

A discussion on positionality is required due to our professional and cultural connections to the study. Katie is a director and Japanese American researcher for the critical literacy organization, The Conscious Kid. Her grandparents were incarcerated at Manzanar and Minidoka concentration camps during World War II, so her family was directly impacted by the

anti-Japanese rhetoric and hysteria that Seuss fueled and espoused. Ramón is a director and Black male educator for The Conscious Kid. A CRT framework was employed due to his professional training and to address Black teacher advocacy in teaching. Black educators have historically advocated for Black and marginalized students, employing experiential knowledge to positively support underprivileged students and student groups (Hayes et al. 5). In addition, we are also parents. Our disposition toward critical literacy stems from our professional research and parenting experiences that demonstrate a lack of racially diverse, empowering children's literature available that is written by in-group community members. Our professional research and personal experiences have led us to conduct this study. We do not consider this predisposition to critical literacy a biased deficit. Rather, we provide a counternarrative for how one's cultural and professional experiences can add, as opposed to subtract, to the wealth of knowledge and research used to guide this study. According to Tyrone Howard, counter-storytelling gives agency to Black folks offering narratives which can "counter much of the rhetorical accounts of their identities that frequently describe them as culturally and socially deficient, uneducated, unmotivated, prone to violence, and anti-intellectual" (975).

### **Research Methods**

This study assessed fifty of fifty-nine Dr. Seuss children's books using a mixed methods research design. Nine books were not analyzed due to their unavailability from local public libraries, the Geisel Library at the University of California San Diego, and online library sources. One of the children's books included in the study was published under Dr. Seuss' pseudonym, Theo LeSieg. Frequency counts were used to understand the extent to which human characters of color were numerically represented across Seuss' collection. Codes were borrowed from

Derman-Sparks' "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books." Upon analyzing the text, codes emerged outside of that source that aligned with the theoretical framework. They were provided additional definitions. Codes were then applied to critically understand how both human characters and non-human characters with racialized features were depicted in Seuss' texts.

Frequency counts that assessed the extent to which characters of color and White characters are represented in Dr. Seuss' books included:

1. A count of the number of times White human characters appear in each children's book
2. A count of the number of times human characters of color appear in each children's book

Codes used to identify emergent themes include:

1. Dominance: Controlling, prevailing, or powerful position especially in a social hierarchy (Merriam-Webster; Derman-Sparks)
2. Master Narrative: Narratives heard most often and most loudly, given that those in control, mostly Whites, control the volume levels (Zamudio et al. 9)
3. Subservience: Useful in an inferior capacity / subordinate / submissive (Oxford Dictionaries; Derman-Sparks)
4. Dehumanization: To deprive of human qualities, personality, spirit / to treat someone as though he or she is not human / animalize / beastialize. To depict belittling depictions of, to be limited to a product of entertainment (Oxford Dictionaries)
5. Exotification: Portrayed as originating in, or characteristic of, a distant foreign country / very different / strange / unusual / "other" (Oxford Dictionaries; Derman-Sparks)

6. 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 (Merriam-Webster; Derman-Sparks)
7. Caricature: An examination of physical characteristics of each character of color, which includes the exaggeration of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics (Merriam-Webster)
8. Invisibility: People and/or marginal groups who are not seen in children's books. Provides implications about who matters and who doesn't in our society. Invisibility in storybooks undermine children's affirmative sense of themselves and reinforces prejudiced ideas about groups often underrepresented (Derman-Sparks)
9. Silence: Forbearance from speech or comment (Merriam-Webster)
10. Colorblindness: Deliberately race-neutral governmental policies said to promote the goal of racial equality rather than equity / ignoring race, racism, and the social, historical, and present effects they have / not "seeing color," including the cultural wealth of communities of color (Ansell 320)
11. Relationships: An examination of each character's role within the context of the book, including their interaction with, and place in relation to, White or dominant characters (Derman-Sparks)
12. Non-human Relationships: An examination of non-human characters marked by racial stereotypes, references and/or caricatures; and their interaction with, and position in relation to, White characters (Derman-Sparks)

Emergent themes include Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy. They are defined below:

1. Orientalism: Orientalism is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences between Middle Eastern, Southeast Asians, South Asians, and East Asians. It often involves seeing these cultures as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous in relation to Europeans and/or White people (Azam 425). Codes used to identify Orientalism include subservience, dehumanization, exotification, stereotypes, caricature, relationships, non-human relationships, and silence.

2. Anti-Blackness: Discrimination, opposition or hostility against Blackness and/or Black people (Dumas 11). Codes used to identify anti-Blackness include subservience, dehumanization, exotification, stereotypes, relationships, non-human relationships, invisibility, silence, and caricature.

3. White Supremacy: Preponderant influence or authority demonstrated by White characters over others, dominance (Merriam-Webster). Codes used to identify White supremacy include dominance, invisibility, master narrative (speech and narrative control), relationships, non-human relationships, and silence.

## **Findings**

In the fifty Dr. Seuss children's books, 2,240 human characters are identified. Of the 2,240 characters, there are forty-five characters of color representing 2% of the total number of human characters. The eight books featuring characters of color include: *The Cat's Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?*; *Scrambled Eggs Super!*; *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*; *On*



*Beyond Zebra; Because a Little Bug Went Ka-choo; If I Ran the Zoo; And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street; and Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*

Of the forty-five characters of color, forty-three are identified as having characteristics aligning with the definition of Orientalism. Within the Orientalist definition, fourteen people are identified by stereotypical East Asian characteristics and twenty-nine characters are wearing turbans. Characters aligned with Orientalism are sometimes attributed an ethno-racial identity, but are generally situated within a colorblind lens, often from an unspecified nationality, race, or ethnicity. Only two of the forty-five characters are identified in the text as “African” and both align with the theme of anti-Blackness. White supremacy is seen through the centering of Whiteness and White characters, who comprise 98% (2,195 characters) of all characters. Notably, every character of color is male. Males of color are only presented in subservient, exotified, or dehumanized roles. This also remains true in their relation to White characters. Most startling is the complete invisibility and absence of women and girls of color across Seuss' entire children's book collection.

In addition, some of Dr. Seuss' most iconic books feature animal or non-human characters that transmit Orientalist, anti-Black, and White supremacist messaging through allegories and symbolism. These books include *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, *The Sneetches*, and *Horton Hears a Who!* Findings from an analysis of these books are included within the sections on Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy.

## *Orientalism*

### **Human Characters**

Orientalism can be seen through exoticized, stereotypical, and subservient imagery and text of individuals with East Asian and Middle Eastern characteristics. It emerged from books containing human characters and non-human characters. Books with human characters that were analyzed for Orientalism include: *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*; *On Beyond Zebra*; *If I Ran the Zoo*; *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*; *The Cat's Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?*; *Scrambled Eggs Super!*; *Because a Little Bug Went Ka-choo*; and *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*

### *East Asian Characters*

Exotification, stereotypes, and dominance are commonly portrayed when depicting characters with East Asian characteristics. Twelve of the fourteen characters with East Asian characteristics are of unknown country or ethnicity. They are featured in subservient roles, hunting down or carrying exotic animals for a White male. They are exotically and stereotypically described by Dr. Seuss and remain completely silent across every text. In *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, *If I Ran the Zoo*, and *The Cat's Quizzer*, eleven of the fourteen Asian characters are wearing stereotypical, conical "rice paddy hats."

In the book *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, exotification and stereotypes are seen when a Chinese man is drawn with chopsticks and a bowl of rice in his hands, bright yellow skin, slanted eyes, a long black braid, and a conical hat. The text beneath him reads, "a Chinaman who eats with sticks." In 1978, Seuss updated the text to read, "... A Chinese man Who eats with sticks...." and removed the bright yellow skin and ponytail. The revised character

retained the bowl of rice, chopsticks, conical hat, and slanted eyes. Both versions of the “Chinese” man depict him in shoes with an elevated wood base traditional of Japanese footwear called geta.

In *The Cat’s Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?*, 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 three (and only three) Asian characters who are not wearing conical hats are carrying a White male on their heads in *If I Ran the Zoo*. The White male is not only on top of, and being carried by, these Asian characters, but he is also holding a gun, illustrating dominance. The text beneath the Asian characters describes them as “helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant” from “countries no one can spell.”

#### *Turban-Wearing Characters*

Exotification, stereotypes, dominance, and dehumanization are seen across the turban-wearing character illustrations. Of the twenty-nine characters wearing turbans, fifteen are riding exotic animals, including camels, elephants, and zebras, and four are playing exotic instruments (*A Little Bug Went Ka-choo*; *If I Ran The Zoo*; *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*; *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You are?*; *On Beyond Zebra*).

Exotification and stereotypes are seen in illustrations where these characters have large feathers coming out of the top of their turbans and are wearing curled-toe slippers. This is seen in books such as *On Beyond Zebra*, where there is a man on a camel wearing an oversized turban and a long mustache. Although the characters and locations are mostly ethnically and nationally ambiguous, illustrations in books such as *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* situate exaggerated depictions of Persian, Middle Eastern, and Indian architecture within an Orientalist lens. For

example, the White male protagonist walks through an archway bearing resemblance to Sasanian architecture (architecture that originated in Persia), specifically the Archway of Ctesiphon, which is the only visible remaining structure of the Sasanian capital city of Ctesiphon (Keall 155-159). Architecture sharing similarities to Mughal-Maratha and Rajput architecture, found in India and the Middle East, is depicted with elephants, which are found on the continents of Asia and Africa, further substantiating Seuss' employment of Orientalism (Surovell et al. 6231). Identification of this style of architecture can be seen in chhatri or cupolas, which are a small dome-like structures on top of a building usually seen with turrets and minars with onion shaped or conical crowns (Altunişik; Glossary of Architectural Terms).

Seventeen of the characters across Seuss' collection are wearing turbans and serve a dominated and/or dehumanized role in relation to dominant White males. In *And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, a turban-wearing character is riding an elephant and dragging two White male characters on a cart. One of the White men is smiling while holding a whip above the turban-wearing man and the elephant he is riding on. Examples of subservience also include turban-wearing characters "fetching" an egg for White males or playing exotic instruments for White males (*Scrambled Eggs Super!*; *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*). Dehumanization is seen in *If I Ran the Zoo* when a White male says he is going to put a person of color wearing a turban on display in a zoo. The White male states, "A Mulligatawny is fine for my zoo/ And so is a chieftain (referring to the man in the turban). I'll bring one back too." This theme of dehumanization and White supremacy reflects a long history of people of color, such as Sarah Baartman, being placed on display in zoos for the entertainment of White people (Schofield). Exotification is seen in the naming the animal the turban-wearing man is riding on,

“Mulligatawny”—the name of an actual Indian curry-flavored chicken soup (MacDonald 67).

The animal is yellow in color, which reflects the color of the soup.

### **Non-Human Characters**

#### *Horton Hears a Who!*

*Horton Hears a Who!* is one of Dr. Seuss' books widely cited as promoting tolerance.

Several Seuss scholars infer that the Whos symbolize the Japanese and that the book is an apology for his anti-Japanese WWII propaganda. Dartmouth professor and Seuss biographer Donald Pease calls *Horton Hears A Who!* “an explicit act of recantation of the caricatures of the Japanese that he had constructed” (Bourne). However, Seuss never issued an actual, explicit, or direct apology or recantation of his anti-Japanese propaganda or the calls he made to “kill Japs!”

Regardless of the intention of the book, the impact is that it reinforces themes of White supremacy, Orientalism, and White saviorism. It positions the Whos in a deficit-based framework as the dominant, paternalistic Horton enacts the White Savior Industrial Complex. Nigerian American novelist Teju Cole coined the term “White Savior Industrial Complex” in a series of 2012 tweets that he later cited in an article for *The Atlantic*:

The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege... This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people... The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.

Brittany A. Aronson explains, “Ultimately, people are rewarded from ‘saving’ those less fortunate and are able to completely disregard the policies they have supported that have

created/maintained systems of oppression” (36). Not only does a White savior narrative play out within *Horton Hears a Who!*, Seuss himself is positioned as a White savior for writing it. Although he supported and fueled the mass incarceration and killing of the Japanese and Japanese Americans, he is lauded for his “tolerance” for writing an allegory about “saving” them.

In the book, the Whos are “helpless” and need to be “saved” and protected by the bigger, more powerful (White savior), Horton. Minear explains that the Who’s miniature size can be read to symbolize “the Japanese as small people needing instruction in democracy—which of course was the operative premise of the American occupation” (263).

Between 1945-46, Seuss worked for Frank Capra in the army to create films called *Know Your Enemy: Japan* and *Our Job in Japan*. The latter was made to indoctrinate US servicemen to “re-educate” the Japanese. The narrator in the film says, “Our problem’s in the brain inside of the Japanese head. There are seventy million of these in Japan... These brains, like our brains, can do good things, or bad things, all depending on the kind of ideas that are put inside” (Minear 261). Minear explains that the message communicated through the film is that “the United States has a civilizing mission in the world, and the backward Japanese are lucky to have the advanced United States as conqueror” (262).

Minear relates this mission to Horton:

If Who-ville is Japan, Horton must stand for the United States. During 1944 and 1945, the United States pursued a campaign of bombing cities in Japan unprecedented in its thoroughness and in the devastation it caused. Even before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States had destroyed an average of more than half of

Japan's sixty largest cities. The major means was firebombing—dropping napalm to set the cities ablaze. More than 500,000 civilians died. Yet the mayor of Who-ville says to Who-ville's guardian Horton:

“My friend,” came the voice, “you’re a *very* fine friend.

You’ve saved all us folks on this dust speck no end.

You’ve saved all our houses, our ceilings and floors.

You’ve saved all our churches and grocery stores.”

For an American in 1954 to write these lines—even in an allegory—calls for willful amnesia (264).

The Japanese/Whos are depicted as exotic, backward, uncivilized, dangerous in relation to Americans, and in need of saving. Note that Horton is the one who decides that the Whos 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 Whos to prove their existence). The Whos don't speak a word to Horton until page eighteen of the book, yet Horton starts his work of “saving them” and deciding/defining what it means to “save them,” on page three.

Another problematic aspect of this story is the insistence on the Whos having to prove their existence so they won't be killed. Horton commands the Mayor of the Whos: “You’ve *got* to prove now that you are really there!... You very small persons will *not* have to die/ If you make yourselves heard! *So come on, now, and TRY!*” The responsibility of whether or not the Whos get killed is placed on the Whos themselves, not their aggressors. There is no action taken to challenge or defend against the violent threats of the kangaroos and monkeys who want to kill them. As in today's racial context, people of color are forced to prove their right to life and that

their lives “matter.” When violently killed, people of color, and especially Black people, are often blamed for their own deaths, while White perpetrators of crimes against them are often not held accountable.

### *Anti-Blackness*

#### **Human Characters**

##### *Black Characters*

Dehumanization, exotification, subservience, stereotypes, and invisibility are exemplified through imagery of the two individuals identified by the text as “African,” aligning with the theme of anti-Blackness. Invisibility plays a significant role in anti-Blackness as there are only two characters identified as African out of the 2,240 characters. Dehumanization is seen when the two human Black characters in Seuss’ children’s books are depicted as monkeys. The simian features Seuss gave these African men are consistent with the way he depicted Africans and African Americans in other published work throughout his career (Cohen 213). Described as residing in Africa, these two Black characters are portrayed through an exotified lens. Both are shirtless, shoeless, wearing grass skirts, and have tufts of hair sprouting out of their heads that mirror the tuft of hair on the exotic animal they are carrying. They are placed in a subservient role, carrying an animal to a White male child’s zoo. The text accompanying the image of the Black men carrying a long-necked bird reads:

I’ll go to the African island of Yerka/ And bring back a tizzle-topped Tufted Mazurka/  
A kind of canary with quite a tall throat./ His neck is so long, if he swallows an oat/ For  
breakfast the first day of April, they say/ It has to go down such a very long way/ That it  
gets to his stomach the fifteenth of May.



This appears to be a reference to the tradition in some African and Asian cultures of wearing neck rings, which create the appearance that the neck has been stretched. There is a long history of members of these cultures and customs being placed in human zoos (Schofield). Similarly, in the context of this book, the long-necked “African” animal is being taken to be put on display in the White male’s zoo.

### **Non-Human Characters**

#### *The Cat in The Hat*

*The Cat in the Hat* is significant as Dr. Seuss’ most hypervisible and iconic character. The book *The Cat in the Hat* is the second best-selling Dr. Seuss book of all time, after *Green Eggs and Ham*, and the ninth best-selling children’s book of all time (*Publisher’s Weekly*). In his article, “Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: Exploring Dr. Seuss’s Racial Imagination,” Philip Nel 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” (71).

The Cat’s appearance in *The Cat in the Hat* was inspired by a Black woman named Annie Williams who was an elevator operator at the Boston offices of Seuss publishers at Houghton Mifflin (71). In 1955, Seuss was at their offices to meet William Spaulding, who tasked Seuss with creating a children’s book that was entertaining as well as educational (71). Spaulding and Seuss rode up to the offices in the elevator with Ms. Williams, and when Seuss created the Cat, “he gave him Mrs. Williams’ white gloves, her sly smile, and her color” (71).

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 (77). 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 foppish "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* (77).

The Cat's mouth is also depicted as open wide on fifteen of the nineteen pages he is present. Nel cites Sianne Ngai's research that explains, "the mouth functions as a symbolically overdetermined feature in racist constructions of Blackness" (78).

The black Cat mimics the role of blackface performers and his purpose is to entertain and perform tricks for the White children (78): "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, *The Cat* 8). Although he is there for entertainment value, it is made clear that he does not belong in the White family's home: "Tell that Cat in the Hat/ You do NOT want to play./ He should not be here./ He should not be about" (Seuss, *The Cat* 11). Seuss also participated in minstrelsy and blackface performance in his personal life by writing and performing in blackface in his own minstrel show, *Chicopee Surprised* (Nel, "Was the Cat" 72). Minstrel shows exploited Black stereotypes for profit and mocked African Americans and Black culture. They mimicked White perceptions of the attributes and function of Black people as subservient, ignorant, buffoonish, and performing at the pleasure of and profit for Whites. This racist tradition is embodied by the Cat, and is ultimately sustained and carried on through this book.

*The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*

In the sequel *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, the story is centered around the black Cat expelling ink from his body and getting it all over a White family's home. This reflects an anti-Black reference from the early twentieth century that Black people get their skin color from drinking ink. For example, a 1916 magazine advertisement by Morris and Bendien shows a Black baby drinking ink, with the caption: "N\*gger milk" (Pilgrim). The connotations are that Black people are not human, their Blackness is unnatural, and Blackness is dirty.

In Seuss' narrative, the Cat uses the White family's white bathtub and leaves a thick ring of his ink in it. When the Cat gets out of the bath, he wipes his ink on the White mother's white dress, the white walls, the White dad's shoes, the hallway rug, and the parents' white bed. To clean up the ink all over the house, the Cat takes twenty-six "Little Cats" out of his hat to help. These Cats all have guns: "My cats have good guns./ They will KILL all those spots!," and as they "kill" the spots with their guns, they leave even more ink in their path until all the snow outside of the house is covered in ink (Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* 44). Instead of the word "clean," the word "kill" is used repeatedly: "'Come on! Kill those spots!/ Kill the mess!' yelled the cats" (Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* 51). The children yell, "All this does is make MORE spots!/ ...Your cats are no good./ Put them back in the hat" (Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* 46). The story concludes when the last cat, "Little Cat Z," is able to use a "Voom" to blow all the cats back in the hat and return everything to its "right," "white" state: "Now your snow is all white!/ Now your work is done!/ Now your house is all right" (Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* 61). It is important to not only look at Seuss' use of racial symbols, but also to examine what he

does with these symbols. The message here is that Whiteness is “right” and Blackness is “bad,” dirty, chaotic, violent, and “no good.”

### *White Supremacy*

## **Human Characters**

### *White Characters*

Codes that revealed a theme of White supremacy include master narrative, silence, dominance, relationships, and subservience. When coding for master narrative, 98% of the human characters in Dr. Seuss children’s books are White and the books are solely narrated by White characters. White characters also dominate 100% of the speaking roles, while characters of color remain entirely silent throughout all books. In addition, White characters are always in a dominant relational role to characters of color, with characters of color driving, entertaining, or working for them. White characters also express dominance when they are seen enforcing their status or position with guns and whips. In the book *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, a White male uses a whip over the man of color and the elephant pulling his cart. In *If Ran the Zoo*, a White boy holds a large gun while standing on the heads of three Asian men. White characters, and particularly White males, also hold all of the professional roles in the books, such as teachers, doctors, policemen, and mayors.

## **Non-Human Characters**

### *The Sneetches*

Dr. Seuss first published *The Sneetches* in *Redbook* in 1953. He said it was inspired by his “opposition to anti-Semitism” (Nel, “Dr. Seuss” 58), but a friend told him it was actually “anti-Semitic” so he put it aside (Nel, “Was the Cat” 75). Random House compelled him to

revise the book and it was published in 1961 (75). It features only non-human characters and tells the story through allegories and symbolism. Because this book, published sixty-five years ago, is being taught as “anti-racist” in 2018, it was analyzed through a racial lens (*Teaching Tolerance*). Our analysis revealed that when taught as anti-racist, it actually reinforces White supremacy by upholding deficit-based, disempowered narratives of oppressed groups and promoting colorblindness.

The (oppressed) Plain-Belly Sneetches are depicted as “moping and doping” 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 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 colonized, erased, marginalized, or appropriated by the dominant culture. Oppressed people want to be free of oppression, they do not want to *be* their oppressor.

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 an unrealistic scenario of overcoming the intentional discrimination of individual Star-Bellied Sneetches through conformity and assimilation.

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. (21)

This promotes the false and problematic narrative that “forgetting” or not acknowledging the historical narrative that impacts present day race, and “not seeing difference” (colorblindness), are the solutions to racism. In reality, not only is not seeing race not possible, it should not be something children are encouraged to aspire to. Further, using the work of an author with an extensive history of explicit racism to teach anti-racism distorts and erases the harm Seuss has done to oppressed groups.

### **Implications**

This study addresses a gap in Seuss literature by revealing how racism spans across the entire Seuss collection, while debunking myths about how books like *Horton Hears a Who!* and *The Sneetches* can be used to promote tolerance, anti-bias, or anti-racism. Findings from this study promote awareness of the racist narratives and images in Dr. Seuss’ children’s books and implications to the formation and reinforcement of racial biases in children. Psychologist Phyllis Katz “found that children were less likely to maintain negative racial attitudes on the basis of race when exposed to positive individual images of [people of color]” (Wilson 2). In addition to positive imagery exposure, the larger goal is to reduce the impact of implicit bias on people’s behavior by creating awareness around the existence of implicit bias and its roots within larger systemic and social conditions, including children’s literature. This in alignment with a large body of research that demonstrates exposure to information regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion impacts one’s future decision making processes and inspires a conscious evaluation of judgments, interactions, and choices that may reify social and psychological oppressions.

### *Implications Regarding Race*

The presence of anti-Blackness, Orientalism, and White supremacy span across Seuss' entire literary collection and career. Seuss' anti-Blackness and White supremacy are evident in his portrayal of Black people as monkeys, apes, and cannibals in his children's books, political cartoons, and advertisements.

Themes of anti-Blackness are juxtaposed against White supremacy where Blacks are either invisible or when minimally referenced, are subservient, dehumanized, and stereotyped. Invisibility is a historically relevant experience for Black people in the United States. The relationship between anti-Blackness and invisibility was documented by Ralph Ellison in his 1952 book, *Invisible Man*. Solórzano posits that in Ellison's book, invisibility is a harmful yet relevant experience for African Americans, especially Black women, because "people do not acknowledge them since people do not expect them to know anything" (131). Ellison explicates in the prologue, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). According to Dumas, the presence of "the Black," which includes the bodies of Black people and the significance of (their) Blackness, traditionally poses a threat to the dominant White supremacist/hegemonic narrative (11). When depicting Black people, Seuss asserts White dominance when he shows Black people up for sale for White men as slaves -- "take home a high grade n\*gger for your woodpile" -- and dehumanizes them as monkeys in their sole appearance in his children's books (Cohen 213). There is a large body of research that anti-Blackness, or a lack of empowering representations of Black people, can lead to internalized racism, and the reinforcement of systemic racism which impacts Black student experiences via

disproportionate juvenile incarceration, lower graduation rates, and many other systemic barriers (Fasching-Varner et al. 419).

There are many racial implications behind Orientalism, including attitudes of Islamophobia, reification of racial and systemic inequities, and cultural distortion. Themes of Orientalism and White supremacy are found in several books in Seuss' collection, including *Horton Hears a Who!* and *If I Ran the Zoo*. Orientalism is a term that refers to the ways that Western cultures view Eastern, or "Oriental" cultures. Seuss' depiction of the "Orient" aligns with researchers who argue that the "Orient," and to be "Oriental," was conceived by Europe and the West. People from this region are not asked their opinion, and Westerners represent the "Orient" and its people for them. Research by Edward Said demonstrates that White supremacist depictions of the Eastern or Middle Eastern narrative, seen through stereotypical and exoticized racial imagery, does not take into account the true culture of the region (Said, *Orientalism* 13; Said, *Invention, Memory, and Place* 187). Orientalism exoticizes and distorts differences between Asian and Arab cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Asian or Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times, dangerous. Orientalism is a Western framework for dominating and having authority over the Orient (Said 11). The virtual silence behind every character of color reveals implications about how White supremacy dominates the power behind whose voice is heard and whose isn't. Furthermore, the lack of specification of the ethnicity or nationality of characters wearing turbans, conical hats, or even of Black characters, reveals the complex ways in which Seuss marginalizes and silences these communities. This finding is in alignment with findings from UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report that documents minimal representation of people of color in media, where Whites are at



the top of a hierarchy and Black and Brown representation is often delegated to dehumanized, subservient, or stereotypical roles, or is completely absent in comparison to Whites (Hunt et al. 75; Larson 2)

### *Implications Regarding Gender*

Intersections of racism and sexism occur across Seuss' entire collection of literature. White women and girls retain minimal speaking roles, are rarely present, and are presented in subservient roles. The more startling finding is that women and girls of color are completely absent across his children's book collection. Seuss' White male protagonist leads dominate the visual space, narratives, and speaking roles. This shows the value in whose experiences matter and whose do not. This marginalization of White women and absence of women of color are rooted in hegemonic notions of White supremacy and patriarchy. This finding is in alignment with research that documents vast amounts of sexism, patriarchy, and marginalization of women in all forms of major media platforms (Hunt et al. 75). Women and empowering representations of women are disproportionately underrepresented across the creation and content of various types of media.

In addition to White males dominating the presence and speaking roles of characters, their violence is used as tool of White masculinity to support dominance and White supremacy over additional forms of masculinity. An example of how White supremacy, specifically White masculinity, uses violence to support dominance is mentioned in the findings where we see a White male holding a gun while standing on top of the heads of three Asian men. Males of color are only presented in subservient and exotified roles. This connection between violence, White masculinity, and dominance is explicated by Connell et al., who argue the fundamental

delineation in media research is between the dominant, normative, White, heterosexual, and middle-class masculinity, and subordinated masculinities (844). Brooks and Hébert state, “the crisis in White masculinity is perhaps the most overriding feature of constructions of dominant masculinity, and the most common response to this crisis is violent behavior by White men” (308).

### *Implications of Using Seuss to Teach Anti-Racism*

Books including *Horton Hears a Who!* and *The Sneetches*, which are cited as promoting tolerance and anti-racism, are inappropriate tools to use when teaching or provide training around such practices. A critical analysis of these books shows not only that marginal groups remain without a voice and are subservient, but also that the stories reinforce notions of internalized White supremacy, paternalism, conformity, and assimilation. Problematic illustrations and texts throughout Seuss’ collection portray the colonization of various underrepresented communities and their voice as a “fun” and “light hearted” conquest. Organizations and practitioners alike use Seuss’ literature to teach equity and tolerance; however, such tools fall short due to the inherent bias contained in both the content and larger systemic mechanisms that normalize the selection of such literature. The continuing power of biases prevents empowering recognition and representation of marginalized groups, and the centering and consultation of in-group members and communities that would help to counter the social reproductions of bias (Walter et al. 213). Large scale implications can be drawn regarding the importance of diverse and representative authorship of underserved groups in the literature and media at-large.

## Additional Findings

### *Debunking Dr. Seuss as “Anti-Racist” or “Reformed Racist”*

Mainstream scholars continually delineate stages in Seuss' work, arguing that the problematic depictions of marginal groups were a “product of his time” and that his latter work supports tolerance and anti-bias. For instance, Michelle Martin, Beverly Cleary professor for Children and Youth Services at the University of Washington states, “Seuss, like any other author, was a product of his time. Fortunately, some authors grow and figure out that maybe some of the things they wrote early on were harmful and they try to make amends. Seuss did that” (Wilkins, “Dr. Seuss”). Seuss scholars support the “reformed racist” narrative of Seuss growing out of the racism of his early professional career when they suggest: “Seuss' understanding of racism and xenophobia had progressed considerably during the decade since his *PM* cartoons... times changed and Seuss changed with them” (Nel, “Dr. Seuss” 107); “how could so anti-racist and progressive a man as Dr. Seuss... indulge in such knee-jerk racism?” (Minear 25). However, when his racist published works are documented on a timeline, it is clear that they weren't isolated to a specific time frame in his early life or career. On the contrary, they spanned seven decades from the 1920s to the 1990s—from the minstrel show he wrote in high school (1921) to the last children's book he published before he died in 1991, and every children's book he published featuring people of color in between.

Having lived to the age of eighty-seven, there were a lot of possibilities for Dr. Seuss to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and make amends for his racist actions and work. However, he never directly apologized for his anti-Japanese propaganda, the statements he made calling for Japanese people to be killed, his use of the n-word, participation in blackface, or extensive career

publishing racist and sexist works dehumanizing BIPOC and women. On the contrary, he stood by his work and defended it. Years after he created explicitly racist political cartoons at *PM*, he commented that he liked the cartoons' "honesty and frantic fervor" (Minear 265). He also said, "I was intemperate, un-humorous in my attacks... and I'd do it again" (Minear 265). While in charge of the *Jack-O-Lantern* publication, he unapologetically stated that, "According to psychologists, a joke should contain three different ingredients: Surprise, Sex, and Superiority" (Cohen 205) and these themes, and in particular, White superiority, remained consistent across his hundreds of published works.

His biographers Judith and Neil Morgan point out that in his later years, Seuss wondered about his "literary legacy" and began "poring through his books" (277). He withdrew only one book that he disliked: *I Can Write!* (Morgan 277). This book did not feature any characters of color, but does feature a White female protagonist who appears on most of the pages (Morgan 277). Notably, the only other Seuss books to feature admirable female protagonists in the lead were published posthumously (Nel, "Dr. Seuss" 105). Seuss had a file full of requested changes to text or illustrations in his books, but "made remarkably few revisions in ongoing editions of his books" (Morgan 275). Morgan commented, "sometimes his stubbornness was involved" (275). When feminists protested over his sexist line in *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, "Even Jane could think of *that*," Seuss refused to change it, stating, "It remains in my book because that's what the boy said" (Morgan 276). Although every person of color in his children's books are depicted through racist caricatures, he only approved minor edits to one of the characters of color in one of his books: *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. Published in 1937 as his first children's book, the edits to the "Chinaman" character were made

in 1978 (Morgan 276). These edits did not remove the racism; they only modified select parts, while retaining other explicitly racist parts. The revised version came under fire in 2017 when it appeared on a mural at the Amazing World of Dr. Seuss Museum that opened in Springfield, Massachusetts that year. While the edits replaced the word “Chinaman” with “Chinese man,” and removed his bright yellow skin and ponytail, the character retained his chopsticks, bowl of rice, slanted eyes, wooden shoes, and pointed hat. The museum faced pressure to remove their mural featuring this character when children’s book authors Mo Willems, Mike Curato, and Lisa Yee refused to attend a book festival there in October of 2017 because of the “jarring racial stereotype” (Hauser). In a letter to the museum, they stated: “We find this caricature of ‘the Chinaman’ deeply hurtful, and have concerns about children’s exposure to it” (Hauser). Dr. Seuss Enterprises agreed to remove the mural in response to the authors’ boycott, but it did not occur without protest from the Mayor of Springfield and members of Seuss’ family, who referred to it as “extreme” and “a lot of hot air over nothing” (Kelly). Seuss’ great nephew, Theodor Owens, defended, “In 1937, China was as far from the U.S. as you could get. It was not culturally connected. It was an exotic distant land. What he did was shorthand” (Kelly).

We analyzed Seuss’ early political cartoons for *PM* that scholars assert are examples of his anti-racist work (Cohen 218). For example, in 1942, he published three cartoons for *PM* that address the issue of racial prejudice in America. All three encourage the use of “Black Labor” in the war effort and are a critique of the American government (depicted as Uncle Sam) excluding Black labor when there is too much “War work to be done” (Cohen 218). None of them are a critique of racial prejudice or racism for its own sake, but rather political propaganda geared toward exploiting Black bodies for the purpose of the war effort. One cartoon depicts a White

man putting up a sign that reads “NO COLORED LABOR NEEDED” in a huge pile of wood captioned “WAR WORK TO BE DONE” (Minear 60). Two Black men are standing at a distance and comment, “There seems to be a White man in the woodpile!” (Minear 60). Minear notes that this phrase is a play on the expression: “n\*gger in the woodpile” (24). In this cartoon, Seuss appears to be suggesting that the “n\*ggers” belong in the woodpile. Seuss used the original expression in his 1929 *Judge* magazine cartoon captioned: “take home a high grade n\*gger for your woodpile,” in which he positioned Black men as “n\*ggers” for White men to take home as labor (Cohen 213). Seuss started work at *PM* to ramp up the United States’ involvement in the war, and propaganda encouraging the use of Black labor supported his interest in boosting the capacity of the war industry (Cohen 217).

The recurring refrain from those who disregard and rationalize Seuss' racism is, “he was a product of his time” (Wilkens “Dr. Seuss”). However, not all White people “of his time” engaged in overt racism, or used their platforms to disseminate racist narratives and images nationally, and globally, as he did. There are White people throughout history, and of his generation, who actively resisted racism and risked their lives and careers to stand up against it. Minimizing, erasing, or not acknowledging Seuss' racial transgressions across his entire publishing career deny the very real historical impact they had on people of color and the way that they continue to influence culture, education, and children’s views of people of color.

### **Limitations**

This study centers racialized depictions of characters; however, future research should be intersectional and further assess gender, religion, disability, sexuality, class, etc. In addition, the scope of this study centers human depictions, but animal characters can be seen transmitting

problematic racial messaging as seen in *The Sneetches* and *Horton Hears a Who!* Only four of Seuss' books featuring non-human characters were analyzed, so future research should also include an in-depth analysis of additional non-human characters.

### **Current Activism**

As critical race scholar-activists, we engaged stakeholders, including youth, families, and teachers from racially marginalized communities, to identify and document existing forms of resistance to Seuss' racist works.

In 2017, we submitted this stakeholder feedback, and our study findings, to the National Education Association's (NEA) Read Across America (RAA) Advisory Committee. RAA is the nation's largest celebration of reading, with over 45 million annual participants. The NEA created the event in 1996 to take place on Dr. Seuss' birthday (March 2nd). For twenty years, the celebration was centered around Dr. Seuss' children's books and the author himself. We advocated that they reconsider their twenty year focus on Seuss and use their platform to promote anti-racist diverse books by authors of color.

The NEA committed to start transitioning away from Dr. Seuss, change RAA's theme to "Celebrating a Nation of Diverse Readers," and use the event as an opportunity to promote social justice. For the first time in twenty years, they removed all Dr. Seuss books from their annual Read Across America Resource Calendar, and featured all diverse books and authors at their RAA events in 2018.

While the NEA has taken steps to rebrand RAA, it is teachers, school administrators, and parents who will be creating and enacting change in their classrooms, school districts, and

homes. We hope this research will encourage continued dialogue on what it means to continue to teach and celebrate these works.



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## Appendix

Book Title	Frequency Counts			White Hegemony		Anti-Blackness					Orientalism					
	Number of White Characters	Number of Characters of Color	Number of Girl or Women Characters of Color	White dominance	Master Narrative: White Narration and Speaking Roles	Master Narrative: POC Narration and/or Speaking Roles	Subservience	Dehumanization	Exoticification	Stereotypes	Caricature	Subservience	Dehumanization	Exoticification	Stereotypes	Caricature
There's A Wocket in my Pocket	20	0	0	X	X		0									
The Cat's Quizzer: Are YOU Smarter Than the Cat in the Hat?	50	1	0	X	X		0					X		X	X	X
The Foot Book	5	0	0	X	X		0									
Dr. Seuss's ABC	19	0	0	X	X		0									
Great Day for Up	175	0	0	X	X		0									
The Cat in the Hat Comes Back	44	0	0	X	X		0									
One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish	42	0	0	X	X		0									
Ten Apples Up On Top	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Oh, The Things You Can Think	28	0	0	X	X		0									
Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Fox in Socks	6	0	0	X	X		0									
Hop on Pop	22	0	0	X	X		0									
The Sneetches	78	0	0	X	X		0									
Sleep Book	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?	24	0	0	X	X		0									
The Lorax	7	0	0	X	X		0									
Oh Say Can You Say	27	0	0	X	X		0									
Hunches in Bunches	48	0	0	X	X		0									
You're Only Old Once: A Book for Obsolete Children	85	0	0	X	X		0									
Write the Turtle	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Scrambled Eggs Super!	40	2	0	X	X		0				X			X	X	X
Oh, the Places You'll Go	92	3	0	X	X		0				X			X	X	X
On Beyond Zebra	42	2	0	X	X		0							X	X	X
The King's Silks	66	0	0	X	X		0									
My Many Colored Days	0	0	0	X	X		0									
I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Happy Birthday to You	27	0	0	X	X		0									
How the Grinch Stole Christmas	0	0	0	X	X		0									
I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew	17	0	0	X	X		0									
The Cat in the Hat Song Book	39	0	0	X	X		0									
Green Eggs and Ham	0	0	0	X	X		0									
Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose	31	0	0	X	X		0									
Because a Little Bug Went Ka-Choo	141	2	0	X	X		0							X	X	X
I Can Read With My Eyes Shut	10	0	0	X	X		0									
In A People House	3	0	0	X	X		0									
I Wish I Had Duck Feet	161	0	0	X	X		0									
Please Remember the First of October	76	0	0	X	X		0									
The Shape of Me and Other Stuff	55	0	0	X	X		0									
Would You Rather Be A Bullfrog?	9	0	0	X	X		0									
McElligot's Pool	22	0	0	X	X		0									
Wacky Wednesday	166	0	0	X	X		0									
Horton and the Kwaggerbug and More Lost Stories	28	0	0	X	X		0									
The Hippo Seed and Other Lost Stories	59	0	0	X	X		0									
Horton Hears A Whol	0	0	0	X	X		0									
The Eye Book	35	0	0	X	X		0									
If I Ran the Zoo	113	23	0	X	X		0 X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
And to Think I saw it on Mulberry Street	87	8	0	X	X		0				X	X		X	X	X
Seuss-ism!	36	0	0	X	X		0									
What Pet Should I Get?	36	0	0	X	X		0									
Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?	114	4	0	X	X		0							X	X	X
TOTAL:	2195	45	0													
50 total books																
2240 total human characters																
97.99% white characters																
2% characters of color																
100% characters of color depicted in stereotypical ways																

