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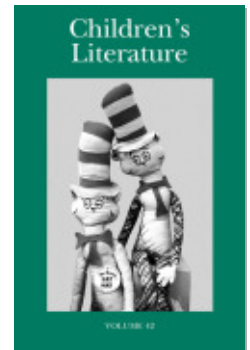
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Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: Exploring Dr. Seuss's Racial Imagination

Philip Nel

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. Considering the Cat's racial complexity both serves as an act of desegregation, acknowledging the "mixed bloodlines" (to borrow Shelley Fisher Fishkin's phrase) of canonical children's literature, and highlights how during the 1950s—a turning point for African Americans in children's literature—picture books were a site where race, representation, and power were actively being contested.

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

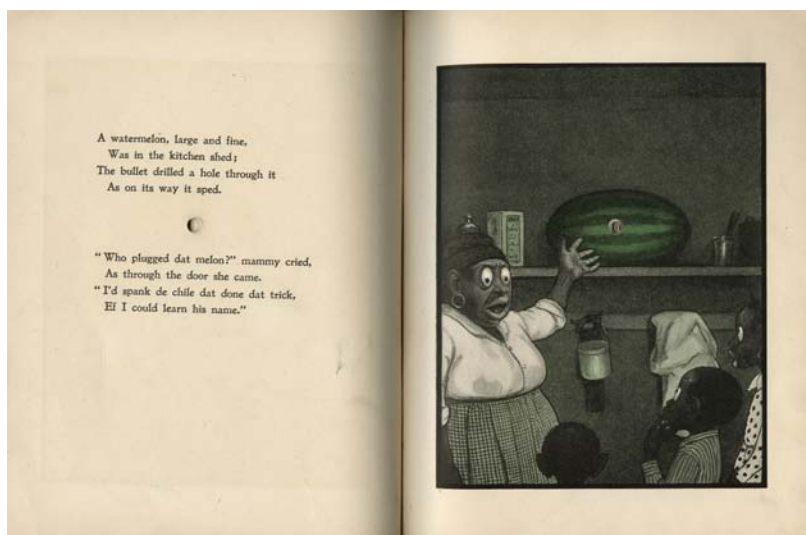


Figure 1. From Peter Newell, *The Hole Book* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908). Public Domain. Image courtesy Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

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’” (fig. 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.

Seuss’s Political Evolution: From Early Stereotypes to Opposing Prejudice

So, it is not surprising that racial caricature emerges in his work—that he 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 figures, 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!”.

Readers of Dr. Seuss’s children’s books may be appalled by such grotesque caricature in his early work.¹ Yet, while images like these are heinous, they are also common in the work of Seuss’s contemporaries. Charles Cohen points to a cartoon in *College Humor* (which also ran Seuss’s cartoons), in which a caricature of an African American stands with hands tied behind his back, and, referring to the noose around his neck, says, “Say, boss, put that under my other ear. I’ve got a boil on this side” (212). The humor in Seuss’s “black” cartoons never derives from lynching. In his own work, mocking African Americans was acceptable; murder was not. This is not to excuse the harm done by the stereotypes in these early cartoons. Rather, it is to suggest that his work from the 1920s and ’30s participates in typical caricature of the period.

Less typical is Seuss’s repudiation of these attitudes during the Second World War, when he returns to the “woodpile” metaphor, without the racist caricature but with a criticism of discriminatory employment practices. In a July 1942 cartoon, a white man hangs a sign reading “No Colored Labor Needed” on a woodpile labeled “War Work to Be Done”; meanwhile, one African American in the foreground observes to another, “There seems to be a white man in the woodpile!” (fig. 2). The vastness of the pile conveys clearly that *all* labor is needed. During the war, Seuss’s cartoons criticize both anti-Semitism and prejudice against African Americans. These cartoons do, however, contain abundant stereotypes of people of Japanese ancestry. But here, too, Seuss would move away from stereotypes. Serving in the US Army’s Information and Education Division, he wrote a military training film, *Your Job in Japan* (1945), which General MacArthur considered too sympathetic

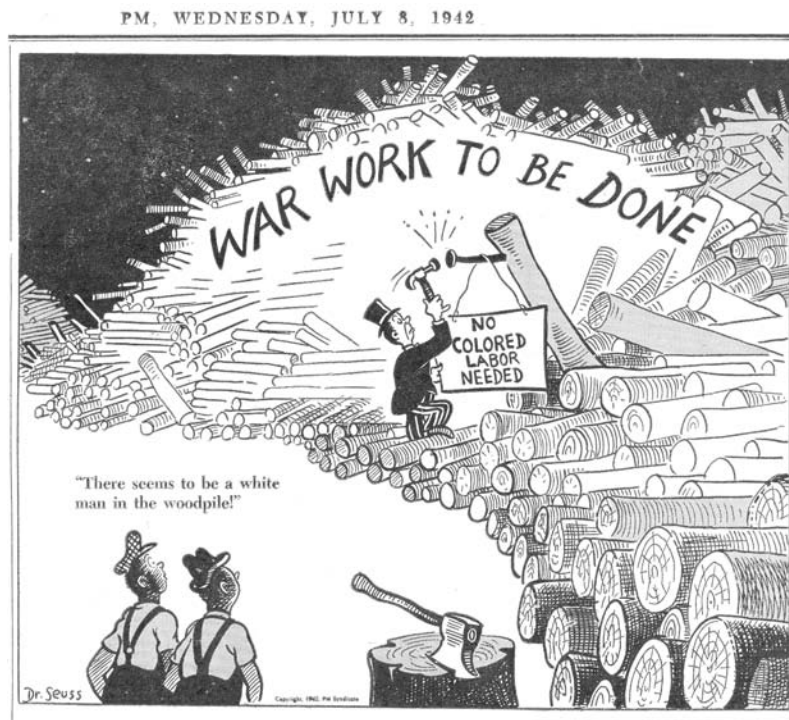


Figure 2. Dr. Seuss, "There seems to be a white man in the woodpile!" PM 8 July 1942. From the Oolongblue Collection of Charles D. Cohen, DMD.

to the Japanese and so prevented it from being shown. Seuss and his first wife Helen also co-wrote the documentary *Design for Death* (1947), portraying the Japanese as victims of centuries of class dictatorship (Morgan and Morgan 119).

By the time of *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), Seuss had not only made a conscious effort to abandon his earlier stereotypes, but—inspired by his activism during the war—was now speaking out against stereotyping. In a 1952 essay, he pointedly critiques racist humor. Though children's laughter is "giddy" and "unfettered," as children grow up they learn the "conditioned laughter" of adults: "You began to laugh at people your family feared or despised—people they felt inferior to, or people they felt better than. . . . [Y]ou were supposed to guffaw

when someone told a story which proved that Swedes are stupid, Scots are tight, Englishmen are stuffy and the Mexicans never wash." As a result, "Your laughs were beginning to sound a little tinny" and "Your capacity for healthy, silly, friendly laughter was smothered" ("... But for Grown-Ups Laughing Isn't Any Fun"). According to Seuss, jokes based on race, ethnicity, or nationality are not good for healthy laughter, nor for emotionally healthy people.

Seuss had also begun writing stories that take a critical look at power and its misuse. His anti-Fascist parable "Yertle the Turtle" (in which Yertle is a version of Hitler) appeared in *Redbook* in April 1951, with the revised version published as a book in 1958. Inspired by his opposition to anti-Semitism, Seuss wrote "The Sneetches," first published in *Redbook* in July 1953. Seuss was so sensitive to prejudice that the revised version of the story almost did not become a book. When a friend told him it "was anti-Semitic," Seuss put "The Sneetches" aside. Fortunately, Random House sales manager (and, later, president) Robert Bernstein persuaded him that the story did have an effective anti-discrimination message (Morgan and Morgan 173–74). Seuss then finished the book, published in the fall of 1961.

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. Samuel R. Wells's *New Physiognomy; or Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament and External Forms* (1866) ran an illustration of Florence Nightingale as the epitome of "Anglo-Saxon maidenhood," contrasting it with "Bridget McBruiser" as an example of Irish depravity (Kenny 153). Her mouth and eyes suggest a family resemblance to the Grinch,

whose book appeared the same year as *The Cat in the Hat*. 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. As Barthes writes in *Mythologies* (1957/1972), "French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions," preparing "the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen, and Vespas." Children's books function much in the way that toys do: they "reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc." (Barthes 53; original emphasis).

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 figures, "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). Six months after *The Cat in the Hat*'s March 1957 publication, that struggle made headlines when President Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne, forcing the integration of Little Rock Central High School against the wishes of Governor Orval Faubus. Seuss, who supported integration, mentions this conflict in "How Orlo Got His Book," a fanciful story of the Cat's origins, published in November 1957. The reason that Orlo can't or won't read, Seuss says, is that "every book he is able to read is far beneath his intellectual capacity." Thanks to television, Orlo, at six years old, "has seen more of life than his great-grandfather had seen

when he died at the age of 90": "When he twists the knobs of his television set, he meets everyone from Wyatt Earp to Governor Faubus" (qtd. in Nel, *Annotated Cat* 167).

The Caricature in the Hat

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 film 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. As William Mahar says of Zip Coon, the Cat is "a pretender, a charlatan, a confidence man who is sincere and ignorant of the values associated with social station or power" (209). He falsely claims that he knows this middle-class household's rules: "Your mother / Will not mind at all if I do," . . . but we know that she *would* mind. The story invites us to laugh at this black Cat's grandiose claims: "I can fan with the fan / As I hop on the ball! But that is not all. / Oh, no. / That is not all," says the Cat, just before he falls from the ball and lands "on his head" (18, 21). As Sianne Ngai notes, "genres informed by the mode of comedy" bring to the fore "[q]uestions concerning caricature and typecasting" (108). Indeed, Seuss's energetic, calligraphic style of cartoon art—the very fact that his drawings speak via the vocabulary of cartooning, a medium Scott McCloud has described as "amplification through simplification" (30)—also foregrounds elements of caricature.

Such caricature gets amplified further by the Cat's displays of what Ngai calls "animatedness." As she writes, "animatedness foregrounds the degree to which emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into *corporeal* qualities where the African American subject is concerned, reinforcing the notion of race as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body" (95; original emphasis). Evoking Ngai's idea of liveliness as authenticity, the Cat embodies his emotional experience: his facial expressions and the movements of his body render his feelings as legible as the book's reading-primer text. His

hands juggle, gesticulate, and doff his hat. His legs dance atop a ball, and bound through the front door. 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, even if his claim to inhabit a variety of nationalities and ethnicities—French, Spanish, German, Eskimo, Russian, Scots, Swiss, Irish, Dutch—severs the link between the Cat and any specific group of people. As Ngai argues, “while animatedness . . . reinforc[es] the historically tenacious construction of racialized subjects as excessively emotional, bodily subjects, they might also . . . highlight animation’s status as a nexus of contradictions with the capacity to generate unanticipated social meanings and effects” (125). Similarly, the Cat’s animatedness both creates a racialized subjectivity and complicates his role in the narrative.

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. On the one hand, the Cat is a merrily transgressive force who *should* be in the house. Until he walks in, the children live in a bland, static world—bored out of their minds, doing “nothing at all.” Sally and her brother often seem more intrigued than frightened by their visitor. While the fish complains, they watch the Cat’s juggling act, look at his bright red box with interest, and smile as they shake hands with Thing One and Thing Two. Not until page 45 of this 61-page book does either child object, and only within the final ten pages does the boy at last take action. If the Cat makes them anxious, he also arouses their interest.

On the other hand, 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 blackface 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. Performance alone cannot transport them across these boundaries. We are invited to laugh at them.

The effects of this laughter are as ambiguous as the Cat's performance. As Lott says of the minstrel, the blackface character both strives to and fails to conceal the material predicament of African Americans: it proffered the myth of the happy plantation slave, attempting to forget history, but it also "flaunted" the facts of enslavement, serving as an "uncomfortable reminder" of it (Lott 62, 60). Seuss's Cat offers a mid-twentieth-century parallel, echoing the varied and contradictory images of African Americans in popular media of the 1950s. At his most benign, the Cat is an entertainer, singing and dancing like Sammy Davis, Jr. in the Broadway show *Mr. Wonderful* (1956). The Cat arrives to serve as the day's entertainment, bringing "good games," "new tricks," and "FUN-IN-A-BOX." Standing atop the box and tipping his hat, the Cat is a merry emcee, introducing the performing Things. Later works featuring the Cat especially emphasize his role as showman: in the original script for the TV special *The Grinch Grinches the Cat in the Hat* (1982), he is literally the Things' impresario, managing their nightclub act (Nel, *Annotated Cat* 60, 62). In *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958), the Cat's hat is like a car full of circus clowns, holding far more than its small space could possibly contain: 26 Little Cats, and Voom. Read a second way, the Cat's performance fails to conceal the threat of violence. In contrast with the portrait of a smiling song-and-dance man (or cat), the Cat in the Hat also embodies unrest: he unsettles the social order, bending the rake, scaring the fish, and unleashing two Things who both knock the wind out of Sally and knock over a vase, lamp, books, and dishes. In his subversive aspect, the Cat evokes media images of violence associated with the civil rights movement. Though he is the one initiating the violence (rather than practicing nonviolent civil disobedience and receiving a violent response from whites), his disruptive presence serves as a reminder of African Americans' struggle for human rights. He is entertainer, warning, and provocateur.

The subversive elements of the Cat's comedy derive from his willingness to flout the rules to which he is expected to conform—another feature he shares with a blackface character. Likening the minstrel performer to the Bohemian, Lott quotes T. J. Clark's evocative description: "The Bohemian caricatured the claims of bourgeois society. He took the slogans at face-value; if the city was a playground he would play; if individual freedom was sacrosanct then he would celebrate the cult twenty-four hours a day; *laissez-faire* meant what it said" (qtd. in Lott 51). Seuss's Cat behaves much as Clark's Bohemian does. Shortly after Sally's brother complains, "How I wish / We had something to do!" the Cat enters and—perhaps punning on the "thing" in "something"—brings Thing One and Thing Two. In the animated television special, the Cat further exploits this literalism. The fish orders him "Out! And take those Things with you!" Feigning misunderstanding, the Cat replies, "Take the things? But whoever heard of a house without things in it?" His game in the book, too, is to take the children's wishes all too literally. Responding to their need for fun, the Cat always introduces his mischief in these terms: "These Things will not bite you. / They want to have fun." And, earlier, "we can have / Lots of good fun, if you wish, / With a game that I call / UP-UP-UP with a fish!" In the tradition of the Bohemian and the blackface performer, the Cat invokes bourgeois notions of fun in order to question them.

If there's a redeeming aspect to the caricature implied by Seuss's Cat, it's that unlike the blackface performer and the racial caricature elsewhere in Seuss's own work, the Cat's racial category is *not* his defining feature, as it is for the black characters on the African Island of Yerka, or for those "helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant" in *If I Ran the Zoo*. That book 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. When Seuss sticks to fantasy, these others do seem to float free from any specific race, ethnicity, or nationality. It's possible that greater knowledge of early twentieth-century stereotypes would unearth other caricatures lurking beneath the surface of Seuss's art, but these at least appear benign. The High Gargel-orum, from *On Beyond Zebra!*, are tall floppy-footed, thumb-twiddling creatures: as their name suggests, they have collars where they gargle. The Hoodwink, from *If I Ran the Circus*, has a basket-shaped hood, and a punny name. If these have origins in cruel caricature, those origins have been effectively concealed: they seem purely fantastical. However, when Seuss veers toward the real, he

runs into stickier issues of representation. In *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, Ali of the Mt. Strookoo Cuckoos scenes looks like a standard-issue Seuss adult plus a beard and a turban. Though the depiction could be worse, he is nonetheless purely a figure of fun: as he flees persecution by allies of the Mt. Strookoo Cuckoos, this gullible Arab invites laughter. Ali may be a milder caricature than the Africans from Yerka or those slant-eyed helpers, but he is troubling just the same.

Influence and Ambiguity: The Cat's Other Racialized Ancestors

These images appear in his work because Seuss was a cultural sponge. He absorbed everything he saw and reflected these influences in his work: the Indian-brand motorcycles of Springfield, Massachusetts; the acacia trees of Kenya; the architecture of Antonio Gaudí; the art of Picasso, M. C. Escher, Rube Goldberg, and Palmer Cox; and stereotypes of women and people of color. The complex mixture of images and ideas shaped Dr. Seuss the artist, and Theodor Geisel the man. 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.

A definite musical forebear of the Cat in the Hat is the jazz or swing musician as “cat,” an African American slang term that dates to the early 1930s. J. E. Lighter’s *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* cites five references from that decade, from a 1931 song by Hezekiah Jenkins to a 1937 *New Yorker* article that stated, “Dance musicians are known as *cats*” (Lighter 367). In 1938, this term inspired the Cat in the Hat’s earliest-known ancestor (in Seuss’s work) and the first Seussian cat who walks upright—a clarinet-playing cat in Seuss’s illustrations for “What Swing Really Does to People.” This article, by the clarinet-playing jazz musician Benny Goodman, describes the “new language” of “swing music,” including the fact that “[t]he musicians are ‘cats’” (Nel, *Annotated Cat* 36–37). The idea of the Cat in the Hat as jazzman returns three decades later in *The Cat in the Hat Songbook* (1967), published the same year that Disney’s *The Jungle Book* caricatured jazz musicians as apes during the song “I Wanna Be Like You.” Though Seuss’s Cat lacks the overt caricature of Disney’s apes, he does mime playing a trombone during lyrics that recall the term “be-bop”: “I can beep a beeper. Beep, beep, beep! / I can boop a booper. Boop, boop, boop! / So, if you need a fellow who can boop and beep, / I’m the boop-boop booper that you need! / Beep, beep! / Plunk, plunk! / Strum, strum! / Boop, boop, plink!” Although the expressive movements of his arms and hands recall Ngai’s racialized “animatedness,” the Cat’s words here make him sound like a bop musician—or, possibly, a beatnik.

The Cat is ultimately as ambiguous as his array of racialized ancestors. He is both different from, and borrowing from, racial caricature. *Krazy Kat*, a likely source of the Cat’s red bow tie, best embodies the Cat’s racial complexity. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*’s creator, had African ancestry, but he allowed himself to be read as Greek, and always wore a hat (presumably to hide his curly hair). As Ian Lewis Gordon suggests, Krazy Kat’s malleable universe may have been inspired by “Herriman’s life as a mixed race individual living in a world where people were forced to be black or white” (qtd. in Heer 11). In some of the strips, Herriman’s characters switch their colors, literally playing with race as a construct. In an October 1921 sequence, a bag of flour turns Krazy from black to white; soot turns Ignatz mouse from white to black. When they meet, neither one recognizes the other, highlighting both how race shapes perception and the folly of that way of seeing. The folly is the punch line: though they may not recognize each other, the color-switching does not confuse the reader. That said, as Jeet Heer points out, the black-white binary remains: “*Krazy*

Kat doesn't upturn the division between black and white, but gives us a fresh ironic perspective on it" (13). Herriman, incidentally, hid his biracial ancestry so thoroughly that although his 1880 birth certificate marks his race as "colored," his 1944 death certificate identifies him as "Caucasian" (Heer 13). The ambiguity of his own complexion allowed him to elude the classification into which he was born, and highlights the social constructedness of race.

Underscoring social construction, Seuss's Cat is also racially ambiguous. His debt to Annie Williams may grant him a kind of African American ancestry, but his debts to blackface performance and Krazy Kat convey the ways in which his race is more performative than inherited. If in some ways the Cat reifies blackness as an essential characteristic, in other ways color is just an act. 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, pawson, 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). On the other hand, the Cat's continuous and changing performance works against it by highlighting his endless revisions of himself. He is as versatile as the minstrel performer who danced, told jokes, sang songs, acted in skits, and did impersonations (Lott 9). The Cat plays games, juggles, impersonates respectability, and acts with fellow performers Things One, Thing Two, and the 26 Little Cats. Further complicating color, the Cat is in one respect the visual inverse of a blackface performer: instead of being a white man with a black face, he is a black cat with a white face.

In this sense, the Cat should be read as a mixed-race character. Interpreting him as a biracial ambassador to the children's home would both establish the Cat's color as genetic "fact" and underscore the social constructedness of race. That is, on the one hand, his artistic DNA combines black and white influences; on the other, reading his mixed-race ancestry as black highlights the American tendency to "read" anyone with black ancestry as black. Barack Obama is often spoken of as the nation's first African American president when, as the child of a black Kenyan father and a white Kansan mother, he should more



Figure 3. Cat in the Hat plastic toy, made by Revell, 1960. From the Oolongblue Collection of Charles D. Cohen, DMD.

accurately be called the nation's first multiracial president. The Cat is the creative progeny of a white Massachusetts-born father (Seuss) and a culture saturated with racial stereotypes. In this reading, 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.

Possibly, the Cat's white face—and mixed race—creates an ambiguity that prevents readers from seeing his roots in blackface performance.



Figure 4. Cat in the Hat plush dolls, made by Impulse, 1961–66. From the Oolongblue Collection of Charles D. Cohen, DMD.

Certainly, the Cat's color does vary: sometimes he appears whiter, and sometimes he appears blacker. He has a darker face and body on the original cover to *The Cat in the Hat Songbook* (1967), and is darker still in the plastic toy created by Revell in 1960 (fig. 3). The orange background of the Houghton Mifflin school edition of *The Cat in the Hat* creates a sharper contrast with the Cat, also highlighting his blackness. On the other hand, the original Cat in the Hat plush dolls from the early 1960s (fig. 4) gave the Cat black arms and legs but a white torso and face, making him whiter than he appears in *The Cat in the Hat* or *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*. I would argue, though, that his shifting

color is not the primary reason that people fail to see the Cat's cultural roots. 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, and why he is able to be read as white.

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Or, rather, the Cat is *usually* able to be read as white. Three satirical works featuring the Cat highlight his ancestry in blackface performance and African American culture, and suggest the ways in which his racialized origins have remained visible to some readers of his story. In Robert Coover's "The Cat in the Hat for President" (1968), the Cat's role as a popular if unqualified presidential candidate frequently borrows popular images of African Americans. Like the blackface performer, Coover's version of the Cat juggles, sings, does tricks, and makes people laugh. He embodies America, his "floppy striped Hat, [a] parody of Uncle Sam's" (40). And he is oversexed: As his campaign begins to spiral out of control, he carries "a stiff red peenie through all the churches in Indianapolis" (39). Drawing on the imagery of vigilante murders of African Americans, Coover has a Mississippi lynch mob kill the Cat. The mob skins him, roasts him, and then eats him—producing an hallucinogenic vision of the Cat as America. Their "vision was all red, white, and blue, shot through with stars, bars, and silver bullets," as the "whole hoopla of American history stormed through [their] exploded minds" (43). Echoing Ralph Ellison's reading of minstrelsy (on which more in a moment), this Cat is emphatically American—and racially black.

Alan Katz and Chris Wrinn's *The Cat NOT in the Hat! A Parody by Dr. Juice* (1996) also highlights the color of Seuss's Cat (fig. 5). Imagining the Cat in the Hat as O. J. Simpson, this book includes such lines as "One knife? Two knife? Red knife. Dead wife." After Simpson is arrested, the book depicts him shackled to a football, getting fingerprinted:

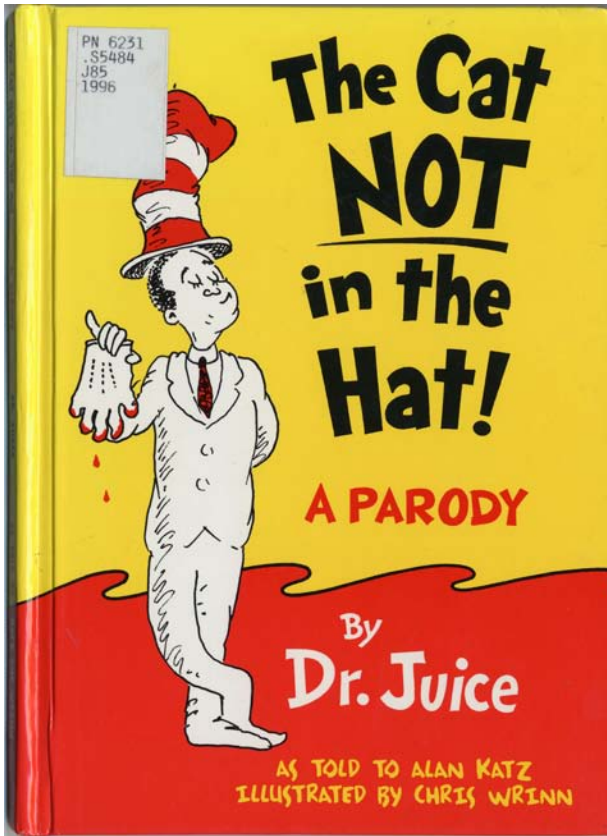


Figure 5. Alan Katz and Chris Wrinn, *The Cat NOT in the Hat! A Parody by Dr. Juice* (1996). Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

“Juice gave in / And in a blink / They dipped his all-star hands in ink. / They snapped his photo, front and side. / And said, ‘Big man, you will be tried!’” The book mocks the lawyers on both sides, the media coverage, and the verdict. In the estimation of *The Cat NOT in the Hat!*, the Cat is a black criminal who has evaded the law—an interpretation that Seuss’s estate did not like. Dr. Seuss Enterprises sued for copyright infringement, and won in a ruling that has become a landmark in copyright law. According to the court, *The Cat NOT in the Hat* merely

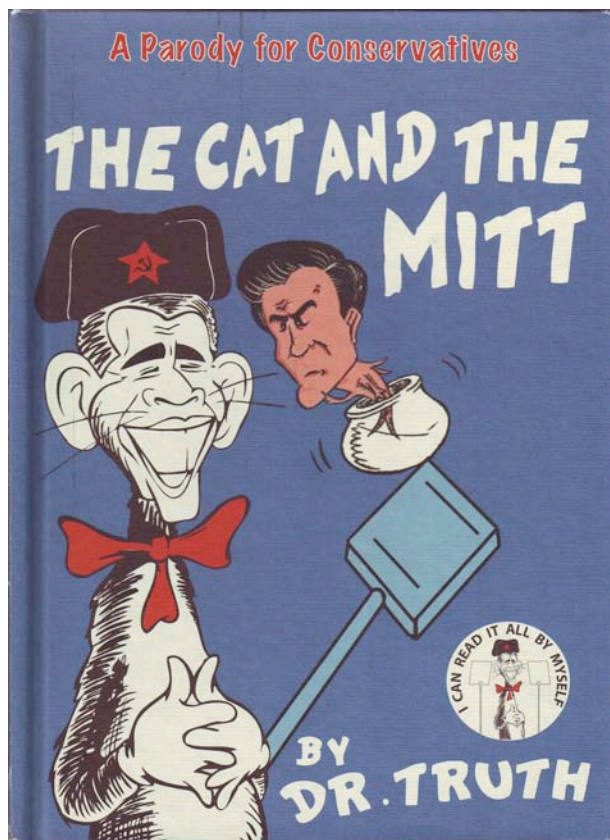


Figure 6. Loren Spivack, *The Cat and the Mitt by Dr. Truth*. Art direction by Patrick Fields (2012). According to Spivack, the book's title is *The New Democrat*, but was published with this title as "a special edition we made once and sold for just 3 months in 2012 during the election campaign."

mimicked Seuss's style to retell the Simpson case; it did not hold that style "up to ridicule," and so was not parody (*Dr. Seuss v. Penguin Books*). Distribution of the book was suppressed; the sole extant copy is in the Library of Congress.

Perhaps because he published it via his own Free Market Warrior Publications, Loren Spivack's *The Cat and the Mitt by Dr. Truth* (2012) evaded the scrutiny of Dr. Seuss Enterprises: readers would have purchased it by mail, or directly from Spivack at conservative political

events. Replacing Sally and the narrator with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Theodor Geisel, *The Cat and the Mitt* casts a grinning President Obama in the role of the Cat in the Hat, and Governor Romney in the role of the fish (fig. 6). Spivack's Obama, whose hat is a black Soviet *ushanka* (complete with hammer-and-sickle insignia), embodies the caricature promoted by Fox News from 2008 to 2012. The fictional Obama and Dem 1 and Dem 2 (caricatures of Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid) "Tore up the constitution / And then gave it a kick!"; the book's Obama avatar is creating a government-run healthcare system with "Death Panels" that will kill Grandma; the actual Obama's successful bailout of the auto industry is here a failure, designed only to entice lazy union voters; in bowing in greeting to Japanese Emperor Akihito or Saudi Arabian King Abdullah, Obama (in *The Cat and the Mitt's* estimation) shows his willingness to "grovel to dictators / And bow to their kings. / Who cares about dignity? / I'll just kiss their rings." The book's artist accompanies this last allegation with Leandro Martins Moraes's illustration of President Obama bowing to three dictatorial heads of state whom in reality he has never met: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, North Korean Premier Kim Jong-un, and Iraqi Prime Minister Saddam Hussein (executed in 2006, over two years before Mr. Obama took office). The book also argues that Obama himself is as megalomaniacal as any dictator, giving him such lines as "I'll build myself up / And make American small," "I'm their messiah, you see," and "I'm their socialist king!" Depicting the first US President of African descent as incompetent and duplicitous, the book's words and pictures not only evoke the blackface antecedents of Seuss's Cat but also a range of racist stereotypes that have been used to discredit Obama. (To name but two examples: in April 2009, the *New York Post's* Sean Delonas depicted the president as a dead ape; in 2010, Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff portrayed Obama as both a slave and an Uncle Tom.)

The Cat and the Mitt, *The Cat NOT in the Hat*, and "The Cat in the Hat for President" all bring the racial subtext of *The Cat in the Hat* to the fore, indicating that some readers in 2012, 1996, and 1968 perceived a racialized ancestry in Seuss's Cat. Although there is no record of readers in 1957 interpreting the Cat in racial terms, considering his cultural roots makes visible four ways in which American picture books stage debates about race and representation. First, as Michele Martin has shown, the 1950s were a turning point for African Americans in children's literature. The beginnings of the civil rights movement shaped the generation of "authors and illustrators whose work

has been the mainstay of African American children's literature since the 1960s, such as Jerry Pinkney, Tom Feelings, Julius Lester, Leo and Diane Dillon, Eloise Greenfield, and Virginia Hamilton" (Martin 50). Further, as Martin, Katharine Capshaw Smith, and Julia Mickenberg have documented, children's literature has been and continues to be a site where race, representation, and civil rights have been contested. From E. W. Kemble's virulently racist *A Coon Alphabet* (1898) to Lucille Clifton's positive, Afrocentric *The Black BC's* (1970); and from books that directly tackle racism, like Margret and H. A. Rey's *Spotty* (1945) or Langston Hughes's *First Book of Negroes* (1952) to books that model affirmative images of African Americans, like Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* (1962) or Bryan Collier's *Uptown* (1999), books for children have enacted contemporary political arguments about race. Recognizing the Cat in the Hat's ancestry in both African American culture and blackface performance allows us to move Seuss's most iconic character from the periphery to the center of these arguments. His color and the conflicting ways of reading that color locate him at the heart of debates about segregation.

Second, just as recognizing how black voices shaped Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* helps, in Shelley Fisher Fishkin's estimation, to desegregate American literature, so understanding how black voices and blackface created Seuss's *Cat in the Hat* assists us in desegregating children's literature. As Fishkin puts it, "No one would attempt to write a segregated history of American music, but the history of American literature has, for the most part, been a segregated enterprise: white writers come from white literary ancestors, black writers from black ones. It is time to acknowledge the very mixed bloodlines on both sides" (135). Similarly, it is time to acknowledge those "mixed bloodlines" in both literature for children and popular culture. Seuss's work is not only heir to that of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Hilaire Belloc; it is also heir to that of E. W. Kemble (in its stereotypes) and Langston Hughes (in challenging those same stereotypes). Furthermore, Seuss did not only inspire the white children's-book creators Lane Smith, Jack Prelutsky, and Sandra Boynton. He also inspired Filipina-American cartoonist Lynda Barry; African American rapper Kool Moe Dee, who learned to rap from Muhammad Ali's self-promotional rhymes and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*!; and white funk-rockers the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who recorded *Yertle the Turtle* as a rap on their 1985 album *Freaky Styley* (Rogers; Nel, *Dr. Seuss* 169). We can better perceive this complicated, interracial mixture if we remain open to the ways in which white and

nonwhite cultures influence each other, and if we acknowledge that one of the most iconic characters in American children's literature and culture—who for over half a century has taught children to read—is in many ways a character of mixed racial heritage.

The third 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). He sent copies of his column to every state legislator. Ms. Evaline Schunk, head of juvenile services at the Orlando Public Library, called Balch's criticism "'a ridiculous thing,' and said that the city's six copies of the book would remain on the shelves" ("Racial Fur Flies" 28). The controversy also became a media phenomenon, appearing in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and the *New York Times*.

Fourth, considering the politically charged context in which *The Cat in the Hat* was published, as well as the more outspoken politics of Seuss's other works, the book offers a useful metaphor for thinking about race and nation. Borrowing from American iconography, the minstrel and the Cat both dramatize the moral contradictions at the heart of the republic. As Ralph Ellison wrote of the minstrel, "His costume made use of the 'sacred' symbolism of the flag—white and red striped pants and coat and with stars set in a field of blue for a collar—but he could appear only with his hands gloved in white and his face blackened with burnt cork or greasepaint" (48–49). For Ellison, writing in 1958, this costume effaced the identity of the performer, reducing "the humanity of



Figure 7. Dr. Seuss, "Latest modern convenience: hot and cold running subs." *PM* 22 Jan. 1942. From the Oolongblue Collection of Charles D. Cohen, DMD.

Negroes . . . to a sign" (49), and aiding the white person's self-delusion "over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" (55). But the trappings of minstrelsy are also key to American identity, because they suggest possibility: "Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical" (54). Blackface minstrelsy is American in that it both oppresses and liberates, denies identity and creates the possibility for new identities.

Seuss's Cat functions in parallel ways. His costume, too, is peculiarly American—the Cat's red-and-white-striped hat and red bow tie recall Uncle Sam. Shira Wolosky suggests that "the Cat sports a stovepipe hat and bowtie based in Uncle Sam cartoons, where they in fact originated in earlier Geisel drawings and ads" (174). While that's not exactly a

“fact,” at least one of Seuss’s wartime cartoons does suggest his Uncle Sam as an antecedent to the Cat:² A cartoon from January 1942 shows Seuss’s top-hatted bird (representing Uncle Sam) looking askance at Nazi subs pouring into his bathtub (fig. 7); in a parallel image, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* has the Cat contending with a pink ring in the bathtub. In other wartime cartoons, the top-hatted figure represents other ideas (Japan in one, the America First organization in another), but—those images aside—the Cat’s red-and-white-striped hat is a very American image, and has been embraced as such. As in Coover’s “The Cat in the Hat for President,” the Cat is “all red, white, and blue” (43).

To paraphrase Ellison’s reading of blackface minstrelsy, Seuss’s black Cat also masks the contradictions of American democracy in 1957. The Cat’s ability to adapt his claims to meet the children’s expectations makes him a character of possibility—even if he cannot always deliver what he seems to promise. As a response to the *Why Johnny Can’t Read* crisis, the Cat offered the hope that his exciting poetic narrative would make literacy available to all American children. As the *Saturday Review*’s Helen Masten noted, thanks to *The Cat in the Hat*, “children are going to have the exciting experience of learning that they *can* read after all” (54; original emphasis). Clifton Fadiman called the book “the most influential first-grade reader since McGuffey,” the first primer that “actually amuses the tot, and so persuades him that reading is a worthwhile experience” (282). Reviewers were quick to hail the Cat as a great reading teacher, embodying the “I Can Read It All By Myself” slogan added to both his book and to all subsequent volumes in Random House’s Beginner Books series. However, despite *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) three years before, schools and libraries remained segregated in many Southern states. Black students did not have access to the same materials white students had. Even though the Houghton Mifflin school edition was reasonably priced at \$1.60 (in contrast with Random House’s \$2.00 trade edition), a school with fewer resources could not afford new books. If the Cat represents all American children’s right to literacy, then he masks a separate but unequal educational system.

An embodiment of the discrepancy between the ideals and the realities of America in the 1950s, the Cat reflects the decade’s conflict between advocates of civil rights and proponents of segregation. As Mary L. Dudziak notes, desegregation became a postwar imperative because foreign news coverage of American racism repeatedly embarrassed a country that, as part of its anti-Communist foreign policy,



Figure 8. Dr. Seuss signing books, circa November 1957. From Philip Nel, *The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats* (Random House, 2007).

sought to position itself as a moral beacon for freedom and democracy. The *Brown* decision thus gave the US government a great propaganda weapon: “After *Brown*, the State Department could blame racism on the Klan and the crazies. They could argue that the American Constitution provided for effective social change. And, most importantly, they could point to the *Brown* decision as evidence that racism was at odds with the principles of American democracy” (118–19). However, just as *Brown* did not end American racism, neither did Seuss’s progressive impulses fully liberate his own racialized imagination. 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 whose anti-poll tax cartoons appeared two decades before the Twenty-Fourth Amendment made poll taxes illegal, and that the first version of his anti-prejudice fable “The Sneetches” appeared a year before the *Brown* decision. In this sense, Seuss’s works

from the 1950s reflect the ideological battle between segregationists and anti-segregationists then unfolding in the courts, on the streets, and throughout the educational system.

Coda: Seuss and the Cat in 1957

In a photo likely taken in November or December 1957, Dr. Seuss is seated at a table, signing books (fig. 8). A multiracial group of children and some adults crowds around Seuss, as if he were the Second Coming of Santa Claus. On display behind him are copies of his most recent books: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (published October 1957) and *The Cat in the Hat* (March 1957). In front of him are his bestiary books that depend upon exoticized others—*If I Ran the Zoo*, *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, *If I Ran the Circus*, and *Horton Hears a Who!* While Dr. Seuss signs books behind her, an African American girl, holding a Seuss book—likely just signed by the man himself—offers a wide grin to the camera. This scene of innocent adoration masks the books' political subtexts. The photo conveys an image of a multicultural America where all children have access to literacy, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Seuss's activist children's books reach toward this ideal, but the complex relationship between his liberal Democratic politics and his visual style creates work that quietly preserves what it ostensibly opposes. Emerging at a crucial juncture in Seuss's development as a political artist, *The Cat in the Hat* carries both the unconscious stereotyping of his earliest work and the progressive goals of his mature work. As threat and liberator, blackface performer and reading teacher, object of ridicule and force to be reckoned with, the Cat is ambiguous, both crossing and affirming boundaries. This ambiguity is at the heart of debates not only about blackness but also about children's literature, racial identity, and American democracy in the 1950s—and today.

Notes

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¹These are but a few representative cartoons. For more, see Seuss's "Stand aside, woman! I'se on mah way to the three hundred and fifty-second semi-annual conclave and gatherance of the Antiquated Order of Loyal and Diversified True-blue Ravens, of which organism ah am a sixty-seventh degree Mahoot, to say nothing at all of may exalted and revered position and office as corresponding scribe and *ex post facto* protector and guardian of the sacred scrolls and parchments!" (*Judge* 22 Sept. 1928: 16; reprinted in Cohen 212). Cohen reprints others in chapter 22 ("Shunning His Frumious Brand of Sneetch") of *The Seuss, the Whole Seuss, and Nothing But the Seuss*, 206–15.

²And two others feature a top-hatted man sitting in a bathtub: a man representing Japan, in "Man who draw his bath too hot, sit down in same velly slow" (*PM*, 4 Sept. 1941: 5); and a man representing America First, in "The old family bath tub is plenty safe for me!" (*PM*, 27 May 1941: 12).

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