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## HENRY JENKINS

### "NO MATTER HOW SMALL": THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION OF DR. SEUSS

*Part of a larger project that investigates post-war popular culture aimed at children in light of shifts in child-rearing philosophy, this paper examines closely the works of Doctor Seuss, probably the most significant and popular American children's writer of the 20th century. Seuss's early career had included work in advertising, as an editorial cartoonist for a progressive newspaper, and as a participant in Frank Capra's wartime propaganda unit during the Second World War. As the war ended, he turned his attention almost exclusively to writing about children. This essay explores the reasons for this shift and the continuity between his political vision in the pre-war era and the later better-known children's books. It makes a case that Seuss's shift towards children's writing reflects a larger current in American progressivism during this period which saw the home and the family as the birthplace of a more democratic culture. Drawing on a range of child-rearing guides and other popular writings about the family, I will reveal a progressive articulation of „family values“ that seems largely missing from contemporary debates about domestic life.*

“Children's Reading and Children's Thinking are the rock bottom base upon which the future of this country will rise. Or not rise. In these days of tension and confusion, writers are beginning to realize that Books for Children have a greater potential for good, or evil, than any other form of literature on earth. They realize that the new generations must grow up to be more intelligent than ours.— Dr. Seuss, “Brat Books on The March” (1960) (1).

“We do not want our children to let protest against domination pile up inside until it has reached proportions beyond all reason. Nor do we want them to be so dependent that they grow willing to follow no matter what kind of ruler.... We want our children to resist unfairness and injustice, even in the laws of their land. We want them to cherish and stand up for their own rights and the rights of their fellow men. We want them to reject the rule of all Hitlers”. — Dorothy W. Baruch (1944)(2).

When Horton the elephant, in Doctor Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), listens to the "very faint yelp" of a microscopic civilization living on a dust speck and tries to rally his neighbors to protect the endangered Who village, he gets caught between two different democratic communities (3). On the one hand, there is the conformist world of his own friends and neighbors, "the Wickersham Brothers and dozens/ Of Wickersham Uncles and Wickersham Cousins/ And Wickersham In-laws," who use chains and cages to crush individualistic tendencies: "For almost two days you've run wild and insisted/ On chatting with persons who've never existed./ Such carryings-on in our peaceable jungle!/ We've had quite enough of your bellowing bungle!" On the other hand, there is the civic-minded community of Whoville, "a town that is friendly and clean." Faced by a crisis that threatens their survival, the Who rally together to insure that their voices are heard: "This is your town's darkest hour!/ The time for all Whos who have blood that is red/ To come to the aid of their country!"

Horton's situation encapsulates the dilemmas that many liberals faced in post-war America — torn between the conflicting values of community and individualism, frightened by mob rule and, yet, dedicated to democracy. *Horton* expresses a nostalgia for the Whoville-like America of the war years, when political differences were forgotten in the name of a common cause and fear over the rigid Wickersham-like conformity of the 1950s. On the eve of the Second World War, many liberals and radicals had joined forces to confront the threat of fascism overseas and to defend the New Deal at home. Under the banner of the "Popular Front," they had sought to contain their differences and broaden their base of support, employing "democracy" as a code word for social transformation (including the resolution of economic inequalities) and "fascism" as a general term for oppression and concentrated power (including the entrenched authority of union-busting corporations). Such rhetorical ploys linked many on the Left to a common vision of what the war was about and what the ideal post-war society would look like. While internal tensions (especially centering around Stalinism) shook the stability of this alliance, the war years allowed many Leftists to rally behind broadly perceived national interests. As the war ended, however, the rise of anti-communist hysteria led many liberal "fellow-travelers" to repudiate their earlier ideological partnerships; others expressed their concern over the collapse of individual liberties and the pressure towards uniformity in American culture. Having worked together across a broad political spectrum to win the war, the Left now found its voice excluded from the process of building the post-war era.

Seuss's outrage over the community's pillaring of the non-conformist Horton (a liberal out of sync with his community) contrasts sharply with his disgusted response to Jo-Jo the "very small, very small shirker" (who places personal interests ahead of the larger cause). The heroic Horton challenges his community to show greater concern for the weak and the powerless. The contemptible Jo-Jo endangers his community by withholding his small voice from their noise-making efforts. Only when Jo-Jo contributes his voice, "the Smallest of All," do the Wickershams and the other animals hear the Who and commit themselves

their preservation. *Horton* is not only a plea for the rights of the "small," but also an acknowledgment that even the "small" have an obligation to contribute to the general welfare. Yet, what the story never really addresses — beyond a commonsensical assurance that we all know the right answers — is who gets to define what constitutes the general welfare, the right-thinking Horton or the fascistic Wickershams. Here, as so often in his stories, Seuss trusts the child to find his or her way to what is "fair" and "just."

Seuss's focus on the "small," of course, represents an appeal to children who feel overwhelmed by the adult world and need to find their own voices, but its politics run deeper, speaking on behalf of a broad range of minorities struggling to be heard in the cold war era. Reading *Horton Hears a Who* as a fable about the decline of the Popular Front may seem far-fetched. One of the ways that children's literature constitutes, in Jacqueline Rose's terms, an "impossible" fiction is our tendency to treat childhood as a space "innocent" of adult political concerns, protected from the tensions and crises of modern life (4). In practice, children's literature has been central to adult debates and our understanding of its meanings must be grounded in social, political and intellectual history (5).

Seuss often used political terms to describe the writing of his "brat books," seeing his stories as fostering a more democratic culture (6). Seuss dedicated *Horton* to Mitsugi Nakamura, a Kyoto educator, who he had met during a fact-finding mission to Japan, researching the American occupation's impact on educational and child-rearing practices (7). Seuss's *To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937) and *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938) had been adopted in both Japan and Korea as part of the official re-education curriculum. Seuss knew *Horton* would be used to train not only American children, but children in emerging democratic cultures around the world, about the relationship between the individual and the community (8).

Despite his own involvement in such "re-schooling" efforts, Seuss despised the "indoctrination" practices he associated with the German and Japanese educational systems during the war. Overt attempts to moralize through children's literature violated children's trust in adults. The child, for Seuss, was born in a Edenic state, outside of adult corruption, yet already possessing, as a birthright, the virtues of a democratic citizen — a sense of fairness and justice, a hunger to belong and participate within the community. The challenge was to protect children from adult's corrupting and anti-democratic influences, especially from the crushing impact of authoritarian institutions. Seuss insisted children were naturally resistant to "propaganda": "You can't pour didacticism down little throats. Oh, you might *cram* a little bit down. But it won't stay down. The little throats know how to spit it right out again." (9).

The children's writer served democracy not by becoming its propagandist (a role Seuss had played during the war, but which he found ill-suited to peacetime) but by teaching children to respect and trust their own internal responses to an unjust world. Often, Seuss "subverted" adult authorities, appealing to children behind their parents' backs, as the closing passage of *The Cat in the Hat* does,

when it invites children to claim a secret (and unpoliced) space for their imaginative play. Seuss saw himself as continuing the “nonsense” tradition of Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll, Hilaire Belloc, and Edward Lear, employing whimsy to communicate controversial ideas to a resistant audience (10). The power of such fantasy lay in its indirectness. As he explained, “when we have a moral, we try to tell it sideways.” (11).

This “sideways” pedagogy reflected some of the core assumptions behind “permissiveness,” then the preferred mode of parenting among middle-class mothers and fathers (12). Permissive child-rearing saw the explicit display of parental authority as thwarting their offsprings’ independence and free-will. Instead, Benjamin Spock and his allies hoped to motivate learning and domestic responsibility “sideways,” transforming household chores into play and redirecting negative impulses to more constructive ends. Horton’s insistence that “a person’s a person, no matter how small” perfectly summarizes the permissive paradigm. The ideals of democracy were to be embedded into the micro-practices of everyday life. At the heart of permissiveness was a discourse about power — about the power relations between children and adults — and how that power might best be exercised within a democratic society. Permissiveness, as its name suggests, was defined more through what it permitted — the behavior of children it both tolerated and accommodated — rather than what it prohibited. Contrary to conservative critics, permissiveness did not represent total anarchic “license.” Instead, it balanced individualism against community standards. Permissive thinkers struggled with the distinction between “license” and “freedom,” seeing the need to “set limits” while calling for implicit, rather than explicit, controls. Spock proposed a model of parental “leadership,” rather than patriarchal authority, seeing the parent as soliciting voluntary cooperation, instead of imposing sanctions, and children as socially directed and eager to fit within the domestic “community.” (13).

Permissive writers looked with horror at the way that adult problems — the Depression, the Second World War — had introduced desperation and brutality into the lives of America’s children; they looked upon the children who would be born into the post-war world as holding a fresh chance for social transformation. Born free of prejudice, repression, and authoritarianism, one writer argued, the “Baby Boom” child “comes into the world with a clean slate, needing only to be guided aright to grow into an adult with the highest ideals to which man has attained.” (14). Childhood was imagined as a utopian space through which America might re-invent itself.

Children’s fiction, in this context, became a vehicle for teaching both children and adults this new mode of democratic thinking. As child-rearing expert Maureen Applegate explained: “If the democratic process is to improve or even continue, the skills of living together must be taught children with their pabulum.” (15).

As McCarthyism foreclosed the prospect of meaningful political change within the public sphere, many Leftists turned towards the family as a site where the culture could be shifted from below. In doing so, they retained the “Popul-

Front” habit of framing their social critiques in the language of “democratic Americanism,” terms we find it difficult today to disentangle from the idealistic rhetoric of the cold war. A close reading of these books, however, suggests that their core impulses are progressive (struggling to transform and “democratize” American society) rather than conservative (preserving American institutions from outside challenge) (16).

Dr. Seuss was, in many ways, the poet laureate of this “permissive” culture, with many parents clutching a copy of Dr. Spock in one hand and Dr. Seuss in the other. Seuss wrote five of the ten best-selling children’s book of this century (17). By 1954, when he wrote *Horton*, Seuss was already gaining national recognition as a distinctive voice in children’s literature. However, he had spent most of his professional life writing for adults, translating what he had learned from an apprenticeship cartooning for popular humor magazines into the tools for persuasion — first, working in advertising, then, doing editorial cartoons for the Popular Front newspaper *PM*, and, finally, scripting propaganda and training films for Frank Capra’s Signal Corps unit. The post-war period saw a gradual narrowing of his attention — towards children’s writing. This essay focuses on Seuss’s transition from war-time propaganda to post-war children’s fables, a transition which parallels the emergence of this post-war discourse of “democratic” parenting. Here, I want to focus on works like *Horton*, the Bartholomew Cubbins books, *Yertle the Turtle*, and *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*, which reflect the writer’s attempt to map the power relations between children and adults. These books shaped Seuss’s understanding of his social mission and prepared the way for his later commercial successes, such as *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960).

### The “family values” of radical democracy

Stephen Greenblatt has spoken of history writing as “speaking with the dead.” (18). My desires are more immediate and personal. I want to discover what the grown-ups were talking about behind my back, over my head, in the other room most likely, while I was curled up on the floor reading *Green Eggs and Ham*. As a child of the post-war era, I want to map the political and social forces that shaped my own upbringing.

In the past, changing academic and political paradigms have often created unbreachable generational divides, cutting off the young from the voices of their parents’ generation. The politics of the anti-war movement, for example, resulted in a painful rift within the Left, separating the young radicals from an older liberal establishment that had gone through the political upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s. The Student Left responded to real blindnesses and silences in the Old Left, especially having to do with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism. In the process, however, “liberalism” (and by extension, the kinds of political alliances which tied it to more radical forms of political culture) gained

such a negative charge that we have often been unwilling to re-examine its core assumptions and find anything valuable there.

The task of re-examining the legacy of the Popular Front gains new urgency as questions about the nature and function of "democracy" have resurfaced, issues hotly debated within the Left. The emergence of cyberspace has raised new prospects for participatory democracy (certainly on the local and possibly on the national scale) (19) at the same moment that the global collapse of socialism and communism has forced the Left to rethink some of its core ideological commitments (20). Calls for "radical democracy" — that is, for a coalition of grassroots movements working together for mutual empowerment and enfranchisement — force us to reconsider the cultural factors shaping American citizenship.

Like the Popular Front, the movement for "Radical Democracy" embraces western political traditions as the conceptual basis for radical critiques of American society, seeking a new alliance of left-of-center groups behind the goal of combating economic and social inequalities and questioning entrenched power. Radical democracy, Chantal Mouffe argues, recognizes that "modern democratic ideals of liberty and equality ... have provided the political language with which many struggles against subordination have been articulated and won and with which many others can still be fought." (21). Like the Popular Front, Radical democracy is situational and contingent, recognizing the need for constant struggle towards social transformation and constant negotiation and conversation between social groups, who are sometimes aligned and sometimes opposed in their struggles for recognition and empowerment. For the Popular Front, such affiliations and alliances emerged around issues of class, linking intellectuals with labor union activists, immigrants, the unemployed, the migrant worker and other proletarian groups, constituting what Michael Denning calls the "laboring" of American culture. More recent efforts towards Radical democracy emerge from contemporary identity politics, with its focus on racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality-based groups. Like the Popular Front, Radical democracy holds the west accountable for its failures to live up to its own core principles and beliefs: "Such an interpretation emphasizes the numerous social relations where subordination exists and must be challenged if the principles of equality and liberty are to apply." (22).

Grounded in the belief that the "personal is political," many advocates of radical democracy insist that its goals cannot be achieved exclusively in the public sphere through electoral action, but require a reconceptualization of private life and its role in shaping political culture. The power of grassroots movements, Richard Flacks argues, rests "on their capacity to disrupt the routine institutional processes of society, to renegotiate the rules and terms by which people live, and to reorganize the cognitive structures that shape meanings and identities." (23). Otherwise, David Trend contends, the danger is that political culture becomes increasingly "distanced" from everyday life and popular participation in elections declines. What is needed, these critics argue, is the "democratization" of the family, the school, the work place, and the community, as the loci

which we come to understand what it means to participate within democracy. "The means of political representation needs to be spread further into the fabric of daily life." (24). Here, as well, the politics of radical democracy closely parallel that of the Popular Front, which sought to link cultural production and domestic experience to broader movements of social transformation.

One way to politicize everyday life would be to reclaim the concept of "family values" from the right, to reconceptualize the family not as a conservative bastion of traditional authority and social constraint but rather as a localized space of political experimentation and social transformation. Read in this way, the family — the domestic sphere — could become a place where the young learn how to exercise power and where adults learn to rethink core values of jurisprudence. Such a project requires the left to examine its own practices as parents, as family members, as domestic partners. Without a politics of the family, the Left lacks the means (literally and figuratively) to reproduce itself. Such a project does not turn its back on feminist and queer criticisms of the traditional family, but rather, reconceptualizes what it means to participate within a family and what might be the most valuable relationship between personal and public life (25). Lauren Berlant has been critical of what she describes as the "downsizing" of citizenship under the Reagan-Bush administrations, creating what she calls an "intimate public sphere" where political concerns can only be expressed within volunteerist and individualist terms (26). What I am calling for, on the other hand, is a reversal of this process, re-politicizing domestic life as the entry point into civic involvement, reforging the links between the public and the private spheres.

In the interest of pursuing such a project, I want to re-examine the history of our current conception of the family, recognizing the utopian strivings of previous generations which similarly sought to locate social transformation within the domestic sphere. One of the most powerful rhetorical devices the Right mobilizes in its campaign for "family values" is our collective popular memory of the post-war period as an age of parental authority and schoolroom discipline, as a period when "father knew best." Conservative representations of the 1940s and 1950s exclude the counter-discourses of progressive school reform and permissive child-rearing, which proposed alternative models of the power relations between adults and children. Reclaiming those earlier voices will help us to question the power of the Right to "naturalize" its peculiar conception of the family. Dr. Seuss seems an odd and yet oddly apt place to start such an undertaking. I turn to Seuss not as a hero or an exemplar for the future, but rather, as someone who struggled in his life and his work with the problem of how one might foster a more democratic American culture. Seuss, in many ways, never escaped the blindnesses that crippled the utopian dreams of his generation. He found it difficult, in the wake of the Second World War, to separate his conception of democracy from American nationalism. Strong undercurrents of misogyny run through his stories, and his depictions of exotic places with strange customs often mask orientalist fantasies. Yet, precisely for those reasons, he sheds light on

what our fathers and mothers hoped to accomplish and how they fared. What I propose we draw from this earlier progressive movement is not so much its specific solutions as the questions it posed and the goals it set for itself.

## Seuss as propagandist

In 1947, *The New Republic* published one of the last known editorial cartoons by Dr. Seuss — who, the magazine reported, “came out of retirement, looked at the current American scene, and temporarily retired again.” (27). In the cartoon, Uncle Sam peers down in horror at a community reduced through its mutual suspicions to chaos. Babies name their mothers as communists. A little bird denounces a run-down horse pulling a wagon. Another man suspects a passing bird of leftist sympathies. Fingers point in all directions and wild accusations are flying. The cartoon draws heavily upon images found in Seuss’s first children’s book, *To Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street* (1938). This time, however, adults, not children, had “eyesight’s much too keen” and needed to “Stop turning minnows into whales.” The cartoon suggests Seuss’s growing pessimism about adult politics as he returned to civilian life. This image of a community, unable to trust any of its members, represented the antithesis of the national unity Seuss had hoped to build through his involvement with the Popular Front. Reviewing his earlier political work will help us to understand the ideological contexts out of which emerged the themes and situations found in Seuss’s children’s books.

In 1940, Seuss, who was previously known as a light-hearted “nonsense” writer, took up his pen as an editorial cartoonist for the newly created tabloid, *PM*, an important organ of the Popular Front movement. *PM*’s publisher was Ralph Ingersoll, who had quit his lucrative job as publisher of *Time* to create what he claimed would be a new kind of newspaper (28). *PM* operated without advertising, in order to be free of obligations to special interests, and it provided regular sections devoted to labor, civil rights, and women’s issues (29). Ingersoll’s political philosophy was stated directly and succinctly in *PM*’s 1940 prospectus: “We are against people who push other people around, in this country or abroad. We propose to crusade for those who seek constructively to improve the way men live together (30).” In their account of political activism in Hollywood, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund identify four dominant strands in Popular Front ideology: a) opposition to the rise of fascism in Europe and Asia; b) support for “defenders of democracy and the victims of fascist aggression” around the world; c) resistance to the rise of “domestic fascism” and isolationism; and d) criticism of big business’s role in busting unions and opposing New Deal social reforms (31). *PM*’s editorial policy embraced all four strands, despite other internal differences amongst its contributors. Max Lerner would write years later, “the common ground we had was Adolf Hitler and Franklin Roosevelt, one the serpent to be slain, the other the hero to slay him.” (32).

Many of Seuss’s earliest cartoons lampooned isolationists and fascists, as Se

took aim at the “American first-isms of Charles Lindbergh and Senators Wheeler and Nye — and the rotten rot that the Fascist priest, Father Coughlin, was spewing out on radio.” (33). Increasingly, however, as U.S. involvement in the war neared, Seuss focused on the larger forces dividing American society. In one cartoon, Seuss depicts the American nation as a enormous boat; everyone is rowing together except for one man who fires his sling shot at another crewmember: “I don’t like the color of that guy’s tie.” (Feb. 25, 1942). His campaign against defeatism and divisiveness led him to embrace other aspects of the *PM* ideology, including opposition to the anti-communist Dies Committee, the segregationist politics of the South, anti-Semitism, union busting, and corporate greed. Like Ingersoll, he was “against people who push other people around.” If, as Seuss would later claim, he rejected many of *PM*’s political and economic policies, he nevertheless was willing to use his pen to promote them, and he drew on Ingersoll’s political formulations throughout his later work (34).

When America entered the war, Seuss enlisted, becoming part of the film unit Frank Capra established in the Signal Corps to explain to the American people “why we fight.” Like Seuss, many of the key participants in the Capra unit had close associations with children’s literature. Eric Knight, the British-born “local color” novelist, best known for *Lassie Come Home*, helped to determine the overall shape of the *Why We Fight* series. W. Munro Leaf, who had written the children’s story, *The Story of Ferdinand*, and Phil Eastman, who would author *Are You My Mother?* and other books for Seuss’s Beginner Books series, both collaborated with him on the *Private Snafu* animated shorts. These children’s writers provided the simple, straightforward prose needed for Capra’s films (35).

Seuss, like many of other Popular Front participants, had hoped that this spirit of “democratization” would keep alive their efforts to transform American society, that the men who wore the uniform would return home changed by what they had experienced through working side by side with those from many other nations or Americans of different races and ethnic backgrounds. A disillusioned Seuss warned in a December 7, 1944, Memo:

“Much of what we have gained is, at the moment of victory, threatened....Racial tensions within our Army threatens to grow.....Many soldiers who have seen Europe are eager to turn their backs upon it...Disillusionment, cynicism, distrust, bitterness, are already souring the milk of human kindness; maggots are already eating the fruits of victory.” (36).

Increasingly, Seuss saw children, rather than adults, as a more promising audience for those lessons. In many ways, Seuss felt, *PM* and the Capra unit had confronted impossible challenges, trying to instill democratic thought in adults whose prejudices had already been determined by their education and upbringing. Political education might more productively start at childhood.

## The Utah Lectures: Seuss and the post-war era

In July 1947, Seuss gave a series of lectures and writing workshops at the University of Utah (37). His previously unpublished notes for those lectures give us insights into his thoughts about children's literature as he entered the post-war era. Seuss took as the theme of his main lecture the need to "wipe out Mrs. Mulvaney-ism" — the rejection of banal and sugar-coated children's books, in favor of works possessing the "vigor" of popular culture, striving for a middle ground between the high and the low, between "Mt. Namby-Pamby" and "Bunkum Hill." (38). In displacing "Mrs. Mulvaney-ism," Seuss urged would-be children's writers to examine the popularity of comics and other forms of mass culture:

"Over here, we put our readers to sleep. Over there, they wake 'em up with action.... Over here, we bore them with grandpa's dull reminiscences of the past. Over there, they offer them glimpses of the future."

Seuss was searching for a hybrid form that combined popular entertainment and social uplift. Stressing the centrality of entertainment values in motivating young readers, he warned his students against being "torch-bearers" more interested in message than story: "The Japanese indoctrinated their kids with Shinto legends. Dictators, Hitler, Musso. indoctrinated kid's minds politically. (A job the U.S. Army is trying to undo now.)" (39). At the same time, he distrusted comics as having no core social or moral values and no educational content (40). The ideal children's book, it seemed, would make reading "fun" and meaningful.

Throughout his wartime work, Seuss had shown a particular concern for children and their education. He expressed repeated outrage at people who misled or manipulate the "small." In one of his PM cartoons, an America First mom reads her children the story of Adolf the Wolf: "And the wolf chewed up the children and spit out their bones — but those were *foreign children* and it really didn't matter" (Oct. 1, 1942). Another cartoon, seemingly looking forward to *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, depicts Hitler and Mussolini unconvincingly disguising themselves as Santa Clauses, arriving with empty bags and with "Benito Claus" declaring, "This year I'm afraid my kiddies suspect who I really am!" (1942).

What horrified Seuss about fascism was what he saw as its exploitation of children's minds and bodies, its transformation of education into indoctrination. Seuss's script for the military propaganda film, *Your Job in Germany* warns that the most "dangerous" Germans the Americans would encounter in occupied territory were those who had been children when the Nazi party rose to power. "They were brought up on straight propaganda, products of the worst educational crime in the entire history of the world." (41). In another such film, *Know Your Enemy—Japan* (upon which Seuss, among many, collaborated) a memo-

orable montage sequence juxtaposes Japanese children at school and at play, with their adult counterparts at war; underneath the images play the sounds of factories grinding out steel and iron.

As he prepared for peacetime, Seuss seemed divided between his recognition of the power of the media to shape core values and his horror over the exploitation of children's minds for political ends. *Design for Death*, another Seuss-scripted film, closes with a call for a more "democratic" post-war culture, focusing especially on "the problem of educating our kids — all our kids — to be smarter than we've been." The post-war world, and the children born into it, would offer "another chance" for peace, social equality, and democratic participation. This formulation is, of course, bound up with American nationalism, seeing "indoctrination" as the fostering of false or foreign ideologies, while seeing "education" as the fostering of the "commonsensical" ideals of American capitalism and democracy. However, Seuss's embrace of "democracy" still contained criticisms of the existing order, recognizing America's failures to fulfill its own ideals.

Old attitudes would need to be transformed through the images and stories parents brought into the playroom. In his Utah lectures, for example, Seuss introduced the issue of race, stressing the "unhappy life" minorities experience in America "which preaches equality but doesn't always practice it." He challenged would-be writers to avoid the racist stereotypes so common in children's literature and to foster a greater commitment to equality and justice. Yet, education needed to be appropriate for the American context, needed to respect children's intelligence and autonomy, needed to be understated rather than overt and preachy.

Seuss saw permissive child-rearing doctrines as reconciling these conflicting demands. He recommended that his students master child psychology, which he said shaped his approach to children's fiction. In many ways, Seuss drew on child psychology to "naturalize" his assumptions about the democratic character of American culture and to justify the political values he wanted to foster in the young. His stories, Seuss told his audience, "rise out of a child's psychology, rise out of a child's basic needs. If you go contrary to those needs, you're headed for trouble. If you write with these needs in mind, you'll have a chance of having children accept you." (42). *Horton*, he said, responded to a child's need to belong, to be accepted by others, to have a secure place within society. The story's success required that Horton's friends finally recognize the wisdom of his actions. Seuss urged potential writers to take seriously children's frustrations over adult privilege and authority, "Children are thwarted people. Their idea of tragedy is when some one says you *can't* do that." Seuss felt that the best children's stories acknowledged and worked through children's anger toward parental rules and that, in doing so, they respected children's innate sense of justice. More generally, Seuss argued, his whimsical stories fulfilled children's needs for spontaneity and change, "They want *fun*. They want *play*. They want *nonsense*."

While Seuss does not cite specific child-rearing authorities, his list of children's basic needs and how children's literature responds to them closely parallels the

list of "emotional foods" Dorothy Baruch felt children needed. Baruch was one of the most important wartime authorities on children and a key architect of the permissive approach, merging psychological insights from Freudianism with a core commitment to progressive social reform. Like Seuss, she stressed children's needs for affection, belonging, achievement, recognition, and understanding. Like Seuss, she placed particular importance on the ways children's aesthetic and erotic interests motivated their exploration of the world (43). Children become subservient to others and come to distrust their own impulses and pleasures, when they are falsely labeled as "dirty" by grownups, Baruch argued. Seuss and Baruch both sought to protect children's imagination and sensuality from adult belittlement (44).

Rather than "indoctrinate" children, Seuss and other permissive writers sought to protect them from adult's thwarting control, giving them a sense of their own power and potential. Baruch told parents: "There is a propulsion in every human being to fulfill himself in the deepest, richest and soundest way that he can. If only he is not beaten back too unmercifully. If only he is not too defeated. If only he is not hurt so much and made so angry that his real potentialities cannot get through." (45). Freeing children from excessive adult constraint enabled that internal "propulsion" to govern their actions, while frustrating children would warp their development and fuel more anti-social attitudes.

## Democracy begins at home

Many parents, educators, and child-rearing experts shared Seuss's goal of a more democratic children's culture. Dramatic increases in the birthrate during the immediate post-war period meant that more and more Americans were spending time changing diapers and reading picture books with their kids. The men left behind the wartime comradery and adventure, the women the autonomy that had come from working outside the home. Permissiveness made their new domestic duties politically meaningful, a patriotic responsibility, a way to strike a blow for freedom, and thus helped to reconcile them to domestic containment. Focusing on the child give them a way to imagine a world where current social inequalities could be transformed and the threat of war eradicated, through the actions of a citizenry born free of prejudice and selfishness. The fight against "domestic fascism" translated into the demands to raise children who would not be bullies; the struggle against corporate crackdowns on unions was rewritten as a message against hoarding all the toys or the importance of treating the corner grocer as a friend deserving respect (46). No less than modern-day advocates of "radical democracy," these post-war writers sought "to renegotiate the rules and terms by which people live and to reorganize the cognitive structures that shape meanings and identities." (47).

Dorothy W. Baruch wrote a series of books during and after the war designed to foster more "democratic" child-rearing efforts, warning parents: "To our chil-

dren, democracy must not be something you-speak-of-but-do-not-live-by. It must assume reality. It must become a word associated and made real by many small but real experiences." (48). Initially, Baruch and others were responding to the war's potential disruptions of American family life, the absence of the father, the growing aggressiveness of children's play, the increased government restrictions on civil liberties, and the hostility towards citizens of German and Japanese ancestry (49). Wartime children, she felt, needed a sense of security, of unconditional acceptance and self-respect; children needed a space to express their frustration over adult rules and restrictions, without censor or penalty; children needed to test their own growing autonomy, through meaningful participation in family decisions.

As the war drew to a close, child-rearing experts reconsidered how the post-war family could help to foster a new era of equality, respect, and internationalism. As Henry Herbert Goddard's *Our Children in the Atomic Age* (1948) explained:

"Eventually we must have men who were born and bred since 1945: men who will be unhampered by the old disproved traditions. That means we must start with the children and give them better care, better bringing-up and better schooling". (50).

With the threat of nuclear war hanging over their heads, they sought to eradicate the divisiveness, the racism, the bullying tendencies, the narrow-minded nationalism that had led to the last war. Some, like Baruch, turned their attention to the psychological conditions behind racism or aggression (51).

*Parents* magazine urged mothers and fathers to model their domestic life upon the Bill of Rights, making family decisions collectively and including even the youngest of children as active participants in this process: "The voice of the child in his own affairs will not be denied in the democratic home." (52).

Educators, including the Detroit public schools, developed guidelines and recommendations intended to make democratic thinking part of the relationship between students and teachers (53). The result was a renewed emphasis upon the "civics in action" represented by school councils and class officer elections. Progressive critics condemned the public schools as too regimented, too interested in controlling their students, rather than allowing them to learn at their individual pace and in their own style (54).

Fre-war methods were rejected as having been "authoritarian," "dictatorial," "brainwashing," and "mind control," all metaphors carrying tremendous resonance in the Cold War era. Every aspect of family life was now being weighed according to its potential effect on the child's democratic thinking. In *Shall Children, Too, Be Free* (1949), Howard A. Lane urged parents to repudiate "the old Germanic-type family and school in which the master was clearly recognized and passively obeyed." He noted, ironically, that "We Americans particularly admired the obedience, respectfulness, discipline of the children of Germany and Japan!" (55). *Our Children in the Atomic Age* (1948) warned that "strict disci-

pline is the kind called for in armies, where men are trained to kill," not for American homes, where children are being prepared for citizenship (56).

Democratic participation required careful attention to children's psychological development, balancing their need for autonomy with their need to respect community norms. Children who cannot conform to larger social expectations become increasingly frustrated. On the other hand, the child was not to be so bound by social convention that "he can not take his part in helping to change society — to weed out its ills and put it into better shape." (57). Permissive writers saw children as progressive forces bringing about a more peaceful world and a more just society. *Your Child Meets the World Outside* (1941), for example, acknowledged that its goal is not simply to help "fit children to an existing world," but to give them "the tools with which to understand it" and "an ability to change it, to shape it toward their own ends." (58). Parents, educators, child psychologists sought to "free" children from the inhibitions, the prejudices, the rigid thought patterns that had blocked their own generation from realizing social transformation.

Here, one sees most dramatically their break with earlier child-rearing experts. Pre-war authorities, like the behaviorist John Watson, instructed parents on how to "shape" children's development, seeing their minds as essentially raw materials to be sculpted by adult intervention. Returning to a Rousseauian ideal, Permissive writers, on the other hand, placed their "trust" in the natural goodness of children, while distrusting the corrupting influence of adult culture. However, permissive writers could never make the problem of adult power and authority over children's lives disappear altogether; they acknowledged that children needed adults and that adults determined the environment in which children were to be raised. Permissive writers constructed a new representation of childhood as a struggle between authoritarian adults and freedom-fighting children — casting their weight behind the young and urging parents to re-invent their own social and political identities, in accordance with the needs of the future.

## Kings, turtles, and piano teachers

Seuss's children's books, from the beginning, display a commitment to the small and the weak (often in the form of the child) against the tyrannies of the strong and the powerful (often in the form of adults). In the opening passages of *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938), Seuss draws a sharp contrast between the realm of the King, rendered powerful by his "mighty view" as he peers down upon his subjects and the realm inhabited by his subjects, and as they look up at the castle: "It was a mighty view, but it made Bartholomew Cubbins feel mighty small." Given the choice between the two perspectives, Seuss consistently chooses the lower vantage point.

Casting a peasant as a protagonist reflects Seuss's knowledge of the folk tale

traditions out of which modern children's fiction emerged. However, Seuss takes particular pleasure in ridiculing the pretensions of King Derwin, the pomposity of his court, the arbitrariness of his rules, and the brattishness of his son — all foils for the disruptions caused by Cubbins's uncontrollable proliferation of hats. When the king orders Cubbins to remove his hat, another appears, and then another, "Flupp Flupp Flupp." The king's efforts to control and discipline the child are absurdly misdirected, since the boy has no say over the hats' magical reproduction. As Bartholomew reasons to himself, "...the King can do nothing dreadful to punish me, because I really haven't done anything wrong." Seuss seems to be getting at the absurdity of adult demands which run counter to children's natures, parental expectations which transform innocent behavior into misconduct. Seuss also points towards the limits of adult knowledge: "But neither Bartholomew Cubbins, nor King Derwin himself, nor anyone else in the Kingdom of Didd could ever explain how the strange thing had happened." This magical disruption opens a space for the child to have an impact on the adult order, to turn the kingdom upside down and, then, set it right again.

*500 Hats* set the model for several of Seuss's subsequent stories, such as *The King's Stilts* (1939) and *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949). In these stories, Seuss provides rationales for children to challenge adult's often fickle and irrational behavior. In *The King's Stilts*, Lord Droon is a heartless puritan, outraged that his king ends his hard work days by "having a bit of fun" with stilts: "Laughing spoils the shape of the face. The lines at the corner of the mouth should go down." (59). Droon steals and hides the stilts, reducing the king to an apathetic stupor. Only the page boy, Eric, can outsmart Droon and restore the monarch's missing stilts, allowing him to save the kingdom from an approaching flood.

Here, Seuss introduces two models of adult authority — the repressive Lord Droon, who uses his power to constrain the boy, and the good-natured King Birtram, whose own playful instincts make him an ideal companion for the boy. The king and his page boy bond through play. In the end, the ruler bestows upon Eric a pair of stilts, his reward for unmasking Droon's treachery: "From then on, every day at five, they always raced on stilts together. And when they played they really PLAYED. And when they worked they really WORKED."

As Robert L. Griswold has documented, permissive writers reconceptualized fatherhood, shifting attention from his traditional functions as breadwinner and disciplinarian towards new roles as active playmates (60). Experts argued that coming home from work and playing with the children rejuvenated world-weary fathers, while exposing growing boys to the masculine realm. Play was understood as an escape from social control and regulation, as a space of the free imagination. At the same time, one can't help but note how this cultural re-valuing of play paved the way for the leisure- and consumption-oriented culture demanded by the post-war economy. In Seuss's modern-day fairy tale, the boy must pave the way for the post-war consumer lifestyle by overpowering Lord Droon's pre-occupation with a culture of production.

In *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, a megalomaniac monarch, King Didd, brings



destruction down upon his kingdom when he seeks not only to master his subjects, but also to rule over the weather (61). Bored with snow, rain, fog, and sunshine, the ill-tempered King demands that his court magicians make "something new to come down" from the sky. The result is a sticky green substance called "Oobleck," which falls in blobs and gums up the whole city. The commonsensical Bartholomew Cubbins warns the adults about the dangers of the Oobleck, but the adults are so sure of their grasp of the situation that they do nothing until it is too late. In the end, Bartholomew disciplines the king, forcing him to apologize for his error:

"You may be a mighty king. But you're sitting in oobleck up to your chin. And so is everyone else in your land. And if you won't even say you're sorry, you're no sort of a king at all!"

Permissive writers urged parents to admit their mistakes when they are wrong. In the democratic family, parental rule was neither absolute nor infallible, and children were to learn to take responsibility for their mistakes, observing how their parents have dealt with their own mishaps and misjudgments. As Dorothy Baruch counseled, "When our children begin to protest that which they see as oppression in our dealings with them, we need to stop and think. We need to take stock." (62). When King Didd "takes stock," he finds a way not only to make his own rule more reasonable, but also to heal the harms caused by his past actions.

Adult's dictatorial behavior, Baruch argued, was often rooted in their own childhood, when they had felt belittled by more authoritarian parents: "We, who were once small and helpless, may still need ascendancy to make us feel adequate to cope with life's demands." (63). For these reasons, she warned, adults who boss and bully children were passing these traits onto the next generation. Seuss's stories often depicted tyrants as infantilized, as spoiled brats pitching tantrums, as never having mastered childish impulses. In one PM cartoon, a baby Adolph Hitler ("Adolphkins") rejects, from his crib, in infancy, the milk from Holstein cows as "non-Aryan." In one Seuss poem, "The Ruckus" wants to "make a noise that the whole world will hear," but discovers that he has nothing to say (64). Yertle the Turtle wants to be "ruler of all that I see," stacking up his subjects so that he can see more and more. In the end, his rule is challenged by the bottom-most turtle, Mack:

"...I don't like to complain./ But down here below, we are feeling great pain./ I know, up on top you are seeing great sights,/ but down at the bottom we, too, should have rights. (65).

When Mack rises up, he sends Yertle tumbling face down into the mud: "all the turtles are free/ As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be."

In Seuss's world, children, the small, those at the bottom are depicted as clear-

headed, rational, capable of achieving a just balance between personal desire and the collective good, expressing their dissatisfactions over unreasonable demands and giving free expression to their natural impulses. Seuss often depicted the adult order as profoundly irrational. In "The Zak," a "North-Going-Zak" and a "South-Going-Zak" meet on the "prairie of Prax" and each refuses to give way to the other, insisting that the path belongs to him alone. Both proclaim, "You will never pass by if I have to stand here on this spot till I die!" (66). Seuss's conclusion suggests the inevitable consequence of such meaningless land disputes: "They *Did* both stand there, till they both were quite dead." *The Sneetches* (1961) rendered the whole logic of racism absurd, as the Sneetches developed technologies allowing them to alter and manipulate caste markers, until nobody can be sure who is elite and who is subordinate. Much like the permissive advice literature, Seuss's stories assume that children possess an "instinctive" sense of "fairness." Children, more so than their parents, respect the rights of "all creatures" — sneetches, turtles, or people — to dignity, freedom, and equality. Seuss was continuing Ingersoll's fight against "people who push other people around," whether they were dictators conquering other nations, corporations crushing unions, or parents bossing their children.

### Case Study: 5000 Fingers of Doctor T

Seuss's live-action feature film *The 5000 Fingers of Doctor T* represents the fullest elaboration of Seuss's conception of children as "thwarted people," struggling to find their own voice in a world dominated by dictatorial adult authorities. When we read through Seuss's notes and original drafts for the script, we see strong evidence that he was consciously mapping permissive child-rearing doctrines over images associated with the Second World War.

*5000 Fingers* deals with the plight of an average American boy, Bartholomew Collins (Tommy Rettig), who finds learning to play the piano a fate worse than death. His instructor, Dr. Terwilliker (Hans Conried), is an old-school authoritarian, who insists that "practice makes perfect" and who demands constant drill and repetition. The bulk of the film consists of Bartholomew's dream, in which he and the other boys rise up and overthrow the dictatorial Terwilliker and his plans to dominate the world through his music. As Seuss explained in a memo to the film's producer, Stanley Kramer: "The kid, psychologically, is in a box. The dream mechanism takes these elements that are thwarting him and blows them up to gigantic proportions." (67).

If this description foregrounds issues of child psychology, concerns central to the finished film, the early drafts of the script make frequent references to the struggle against fascism (68). In Bart's waking reality, Dr. T is "not especially frightening," a "tight-lipped and methodical looking old gentleman ... no more vicious and harmful than Victor Moore." Once we enter Bart's dream, however, Seuss increasingly characterizes Dr. T as the reincarnation of Der Fuhrer. Seuss

describes his kingdom as "plastered with posters, showing Dr. Terwilliger in a Hitler-like dictator's pose." His soldiers wear medals that "resemble an iron cross, only it is engraved with a likeness of Dr. Terwilliger in the center." The mother has a "devotion to the man...bordering on the fanatical," a "gauleiter-like allegiance" which blinds her to her son's agonies. When he is challenged, Dr. T "flies into a Hitlerian rage." He sees the "piano racket" as a scheme for global domination, and his study is decorated with an enormous world map captioned "The Terwilliger Empire of Tomorrow." He has built a massive piano, designed for the enslaved fingers of 500 little boys, upon which he will perform his musical compositions (69).

Many traces of this Hitler analogy find their way into the final film. The sets are hyperbolic versions of monumental Bauhaus architecture, and the grand procession borrows freely from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, with his blue-helmeted henchmen goose stepping and holding aloft giant versions of his "Happy Fingers" logo. Terwilliger's elaborate conductor's uniform, one reviewer noted, was "a combination of a circus band drum major, Carmen Miranda, and Herman Goering." (70). Most of the Henchmen bear Germanic names. Hans Conried's long thin body and his floppy black hair closely resemble Seuss's PM caricatures of Hitler (minus the mustache). The fact that Conried had provided some of the narration for *Design for Death*, performing the voices of the fascist leaders, could only have strengthened the association for contemporary viewers. Even the film's musical score bore strong Germanic associations; its composer, Eugene Hollander, had studied under Richard Strauss, done music for Max Reinhardt in Berlin before the war, and was the musical director for *The Blue Angel*. (71).

Some of the film's more disturbing images drew on popular memories of the Nazi concentration camps. Arriving by yellow school buses, rather than railway cars, the unfortunate boys are herded through gates, where their comic books, balls, slingshots, and pet frogs are confiscated. Then, they are marched off to their "lock-me-tights" in the dungeon. There, Dr. T dreams up fiendish (and Dante-esque) tortures for all those who refuse to play his beloved keyboard. The captive musicians have sullen eyes and sunken cheeks, lean and gaunt in their prison uniforms.

In constructing the more sympathetic plumber, Zlabadowski, Seuss drew upon other associations with the war. In the first draft of the script, Zlabadowski is described in terms that strongly link him to Eastern Europe. "Shaking his head sadly in deep Slavic gloom," Zlabadowski is "a big shaggy edition of Molotov, a kindly Molotov with the cosmic unhappiness of Albert Einstein." As the script progresses, Zlabadowski abandons all of his Slavic associations, except for his rather distinctive name, becoming a more all-American type, a reluctant patriot who must first shed his isolationist impulses before he can be enlisted as Bart's ally in the struggle to stop Terwilliger. In one of his notes about the script, Seuss summarizes the character: "Z's conflict: Desire to help people. Desire to keep out of trouble. An old soldier trying to be a pacifist. He's tired of war. It's futile."

(72). In the early drafts, Zlabadowski knows Terwilliger's evil plans, but he doesn't want to get involved if it means losing his overtime pay for installing the sinks.

In the finished film, many of these adult concerns have vanished. Zlabadowski represents the ideal permissive parent. Initially, he is a bit distracted by his work and eager to make a buck, a bit eager to dismiss Bart's warnings as wild-eyed fantasies. Ultimately, he becomes a warm-hearted playmate (engaging the boy in a pretend fishing trip) and a wise counselor (helping him concoct from the contents of the boy's pockets a sound-stopping device). Angered by Zlabadowski's initial indifference, Bart challenges his adult privileges and sings a song that might have been the anthem for permissive child-rearing:

"Just because we're kids, because we're sorta small, because we're closer to the ground, and you are bigger pound by pound, you have no right, you have no right to push and shove us little kids around."

Proclaiming children's rights, Bart denounces adult assumptions that deeper voices, facial hair, or wallets justify unreasonable exercises of power over children. Zlabadowski regains his idealism: "I don't like anybody who pushes anybody around." The two cut their fingers with Bart's pocketknife and take a blood oath that binds them together — father and son — in the struggle against Terwillikerism.

In the film's opening scene, Bart off-handedly remarks upon the death of his father, presumably during the war, and Zlabadowski and Terwilliker are cast as good and bad surrogate fathers, respectively. In his nightmare, his piano-crazed mother is hypnotized into accepting Terwilliker's hand in marriage, a deal to be consummated immediately following the great concert. Not unlike Lord Droon in *The King's Stilts*, Terwilliker represents the pre-war Patriarch who demands obedience and silence from his children. In his fantasy, Bart hopes that the more permissive Zlabadowski will fall in love with his mother and become his father, an arrangement consummated by their blood oath. Zlabadowski understands the needs of boys; he represents the manly virtues of fishing and baseball against Dr. Terwilliker's effeminate high culture, defending America against Terwilliker's Germany.

In the end, the task of finding the right father — and overcoming the bad patriarch — falls squarely on Bart's shoulders. He alone will face down Terwilliker, using his "very atomic" sound-catching device to disrupt the concert and liberate the children. The closing moments, where rebellious children hurl their music sheets in the air, shouting in defiance, stomping on and punching the piano keys, represents one of the most vivid images of resistance in all of American cinema. By this point, Bart's struggle against Terwilliker has absorbed tremendous ideological weight, a struggle of the freedom-fighting all-American boy (with his red-and-white-striped shirt and his blue pants) against an old-world tyrant — the struggle of those who are "closer to the ground" against those who "shout" and "beat little kids about," the struggle of permissive parenting against more authoritarian alternatives.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, Seuss's children's books were as political as any of his war-related work. They helped American parents to imagine how domestic life could be restructured along more democratic principles. They participated in a larger movement to help children overcome the prejudices and the divisiveness that had "poisoned" America's wartime effort. Seuss offered fantasies where powerful rulers are infantile and foolish and destined to end face down in the mud. His stories depicted worlds where children gain control over basic social institutions and remake them according to their own innovative ideas, where children challenge kings and force them to apologize to their subjects, or where kids lead a schoolhouse revolt against unreasonable teachers.

Conservative critics, such as Spiro Agnew and Norman Vincent Peale, blamed Spock and "permissiveness" for the counter-culture, suggesting that the anti-war movement reflected the antics of "spoiled" children who needed to be "spanked." To accept such an explanation would be to ignore the real political disagreements that fueled the student revolts of the 1960s. At the same time, one can't help but wonder if the questioning of domestic power, which permissive child-rearing represented, helped to foster a mode of thinking which saw "the personal as political." One can't help but ask whether a mode of childrearing which empowered children to challenge adult institutions had an impact on how the post-war generation thought about themselves and about their place in the world (73).

Renewed interest in the project of "radical democracy" forces us to think about how an empowered citizenship might be fostered on the most local levels — not only by changing politics within our communities or our work places, but also by rethinking the politics of the family. We must recognize that this project has a history, even if we do not want, in any simple fashion, to embrace permissiveness. There is much about permissiveness we might well want to reject. Feminist critics note that permissive approaches often disempowered women even as they sought to empower children, that permissiveness was linked to the domestic containment of women and that writers like Spock helped to "naturalize" dominant conceptions of gender roles and normative sexual identities. Permissiveness often mystified the power relations between children and adults, making authority seem to disappear when its mechanisms had only been masked. Permissiveness placed impossible expectations on parents, which are still being felt as we confront an economic reality that makes post-war models impossible to maintain. Permissiveness romanticizes the child as a Rousseauian ideal. No, permissiveness won't do at all!

Yet, there is something else we can learn from permissive writers like Dr. Spock and Dr. Seuss — the process of rethinking the family, of re-imagining the power relations within the home, and of seeing childhood as vitally linked to the political transformation of American culture. The utopian futures envisioned by permissive writers were never fully achieved. Social institutions and attitudes

proved too deep-rooted to be transformed by simply changing the ways parents raised their young. But, perhaps, we would do better to evaluate permissiveness according to its goals — rather than its results. On the left, we are often slow to acknowledge partial victories, resulting in a profound and disempowering climate of pessimism and cynicism. What we need at the present moment are new utopian fantasies, new visions of the future, that will motivate struggles for social transformation. Compared to the "real think" of traditional leftism, such utopianism may seem like "fairy tales." However, rediscovering the democratic imagination of Doctor Seuss should remind us that "fairy tales" can become powerful tools for political transformation.

## Notes

1. Dr. Seuss, "Brat Books on the March," *Los Angeles Times*, November 1960, Seuss Papers, Geisel Library, University of California — San Diego. (Subsequent references will refer to Seuss Papers.)
2. Dorothy W. Baruch, *Parents Can Be People* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1944), pp.114-115.
3. Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!* (New York: Random House, 1954). The pages are unnumbered; but, hey, it's a really short book, so you'll just have to read it!
4. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1984).
5. For conflicting views on the political content of children's literature, see Alison Lurie, *Not in Front of the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990) and Jason Epstein, "Good Bunnies Always Obey": Books For American Children" in Sheila Egoff, G.T. Stubbs and L.F. Ashley (Eds.), *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.74-94. In practice, the political discourse in children's literature has been varied as that of adult fiction, with competing voices advancing different positions on the core issues the genre circles around, especially on the power relations between children and adults and on the place of children's play within the larger social sphere.
6. Dr. Seuss is the pen name of Theodor Geisel. It is conventional for writers to distinguish between Seuss as a writer and Geisel as a person. However, I believe that this distinction sustains a break between his children's books and his adult political activities which exaggerates the difference between the two. In any case, most of his adult work either bore the "Dr. Seuss" pen name (his humor-magazine material, his advertising work, his PM cartoons) or was unsigned (his military work). Some of his children's books, i.e. those he did not illustrate, were published under a range of pseudonyms including Rosetta Stone and Theo LeSeig. I have decided in this essay to refer to Geisel by his pen name in every context.
7. He was impressed by his discovery that Japanese children, educated according to American principles, were embracing western cultural values. Asked to draw pictures of their future, thousands of Japanese school children depicted themselves in helping professions, healing the sick, educating the ignorant, and rebuilding their society: Seuss felt children of the previous generation would have seen their futures as warriors. Young girls imagined business careers for themselves that would have been closed to their mothers. For background on Seuss's investigation of Japanese education, see

- Judith and Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995).
8. Like many of his generation, Seuss's hopes for bestowing democracy on the world ran against his fear that the world was not ready to receive it. In confronting post-war Japan, Seuss saw both the prospect of legitimate friendship across cultural differences and the dangers of a culture that only a few years before he had viewed as hopelessly militaristic and imperialistic. His participation in the re-education of Japan can not simply be reduced to cultural imperialism, without regard to his idealistic goals or to the historical context. Yet, at the same time, it never can be separated from the imperialistic mechanisms by which those goals were achieved.
  9. *Lecture Notes*, University of Utah Workshops, July 1947, Seuss Papers, Geisel Library, University of California-San Diego, Box 19, File 6. Subsequent references will refer to Seuss Papers.
  10. In my longer work-in-progress, an intellectual biography of Dr. Seuss, I argue that nonsense writing was far from meaningless; rather, it was the expression of a peculiarly modernist sensibility, an acknowledgment of aspects of contemporary social experience which either destabilized traditional structures of meaning or seemed senseless, mechanical, or nonhuman. Its common themes reflect crisis points in the hegemony of the 19th century middle classes, where the old was giving way to the new and where narrow consensus confronted expanding diversity. Given Seuss's rather stylized and fanciful representations, which constitute a vernacular version of surrealism or dada, his fit within the aesthetics of the Popular Front might seem problematic. The Popular Front has most often been associated with an aesthetic of realism or naturalism. However, Denning, *op. cit.*, notes strong elements of modernism running through the cultural politics of the Popular Front, and has stressed the non-naturalistic elements in many of the central artistic accomplishments of this movement. Seuss's children's books, I would argue, represented an odd negotiation between naturalism, which was the dominant aesthetic of children's literature of the period, and the New Humorists' fascination with the fantastic and the nonsensical.
  11. Robert Cahn, "The Wonderful World of Dr. Seuss," undated and unidentified magazine clipping, *Seuss Scrapbook*, Seuss Papers.
  12. What I am calling "permissiveness" was far from a coherent or univocal discourse. Permissive impulses entered American life from many different directions, from the work of Yale's Gessell Institute, from the anthropological research of Margaret Mead, from the best-selling "baby books" of pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, and from the commercial discourse of advertising and popular magazines. Permissive thought dominates child-rearing advice in the post-war period, though not without challenge and controversy. The emergence of permissiveness reflected many shifts in post-war America's conception of childhood—a changing understanding of child sexuality and the place of sensuality and pleasure in development and learning; a fascination with the "primitivism" of the child and its "natural" and "pure" knowledge of its own basic biological needs; a restructuring of the family unit which served to justify the domestic containment of women by granting children greater authority at the expense of their mothers; new sociological and psychological understanding of the stages of children's "normal" maturation and of the centrality of play in their growing sense of themselves and the world; changing ideals about what parents valued in their children, stressing autonomy and creativity over obedience; a shift within the economic climate of the country, away from a culture of production and towards a culture of consumption. The multiplicity of permissive discourses, as well as the variety of their manifestation within popular culture, is the focus of my current research interests.
  13. For a useful discussion of the political theories underlying Spock's work, see William Grabner, "The Unstable World of Benjamin Spock: Social Engineering in a Democratic Culture, 1917-1950," *Journal of American History*, 167:3 (Spring 1980), pp. 612-629. Grabner's understanding of this post-war period closely parallels my own focus here: "Through control over the child-rearing process, Spock sought to create a society that was more cooperative, more consensus-oriented, more group-conscious, and a society that was more knowable, more consistent, and more comforting."
  14. Henry Herbert Goddard, *Our Children in the Atomic Age* (Mellott, Indiana: Hopkins, 1948), p. ix.
  15. Maureen Applegate, *Everybody's Business — Our Children* (Evanston, Ill: Row, Peterson, 1952), p. 59.
  16. Most accounts of the American Popular Front, such as Michael Denning's epic study, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), focus on the movement's public sphere politics, on Waiting for Lefty, WPA projects, and political rallies. The relationship of the American Popular Front to domestic sphere issues in general and permissiveness in general remains under-explored, in part because our standard narrative focuses on the collapse of the movement in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Denning, however, makes the case for its influence on American culture extending well beyond the end of World War II. The cliché of the "red-diaper baby" suggests that adult's political commitments had some influence on child-rearing practice, however.
  17. *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* (1960), *Hop on Pop* (1963), *Dr. Seuss's ABC* (1963), and *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) represent the top five best-selling children's books between 1895-1975. *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958) came in eighth place preceded only by *Charlotte's Web* (6th) and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (7th). Ruth K. MacDonald, *Dr. Seuss* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), p. 11.
  18. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (*New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics*) No 84, Vol 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.) "I began with the desire to speak with the dead."
  19. See, for example, Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York: Viking, 1995).
  20. For an essential overview of these debates, see David Trend (Ed.), *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
  21. Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy or Liberal Democracy?" in *Trend* (1996), p. 25.
  22. Mouffe, p. 24.
  23. Richard Flacks, "Reviving Democratic Activism: Thoughts About Strategy in a Dark Time," in David Trend (1996), p. 110.
  24. David Trend, "Democracy's Crisis of Meaning," in David Trend (Ed.), *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.
  25. Of course, one important first step would be to redefine the family to include a broader range of social arrangements based on mutual trust and social alliance, including same-sex partnerships.
  26. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
  27. Dr. Seuss, *Cartoon*, *The New Republic*, July 28 1947, p. 7.
  28. Roy Hoopes, Ralph Ingersoll: *A Biography* (New York: Antheneum, 1985).
  29. Among his regular contributors were some of the leading literary and political voices of the period, including Margaret Bourke-White, Leo Huberman, Max Lerner, Tom

- Meany, I. F. Stone, Hodding Carter, Erskine Caldwell, and Albert Deutsch. Dr. Benjamin Spock offered a regular column of advice for new parents, writings that would provide the basis for his best-selling *Baby and Child Care*. Stone's role in the publication is discussed in detail in Andrew Patner, *I. F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) and in Robert C. Cottrell, *Izzy: A Biography of I. F. Stone* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
30. Ralph Ingersoll, as quoted in *Patner*, p. 73.
  31. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Garden City: Anchor, 1980).
  32. Max Lerner, "Preface," in Roy Hoopes, op. cit., p. viii.
  33. Edward Connery Lathem, Interview with Dr. Seuss, Undated Transcript, *Seuss Papers*, Box 8, File 14, p. 141. The complete transcript of this interview is held in the Baker Library Collection at Dartmouth. All PM cartoons cited are included in *Seuss Papers*, Box 18, Files 11-19. Where information about their dates is provided, I have included it parenthetically in the text. In other cases, the clippings are currently undated.
  34. "When I joined up I told them I didn't care for a lot of their economic policies and a lot of their political policies." Lathem transcript, *Seuss Papers*, Box 18, File 14, p. 128. Many participants in Popular Front organizations distanced themselves from their political commitments in the wake of the rise of McCarthyism. Seuss, as a children's writer, had added concern in preserving the "innocence" of his audience from adult political concerns, and indeed, most of the publicity and writing about Seuss has tended to ignore his earlier adult writings and political activities. We will probably never know how deeply committed Seuss was to PM's politics, though his continued participation in progressive contexts throughout the 1940s and early 1950s suggests that he was minimally a "fellow traveler." At the same time, we must not duplicate a McCarthyist logic of "guilt by association" in our attempts to claim Seuss for the Left. Michael Denning, op. cit., cautions us against placing too much stress on party membership or seeing the Popular Front as a cohesive political strategy or organization. Rather, Denning argues, the Popular Front represented a "structure of feeling," a way of understanding contemporary social experience, which shaped the political and cultural activities of many artists and intellectuals, who would not have viewed themselves as radicals. Seuss's participation within a succession of groups which writers like Denning associate with the Popular Front (PM, the Capra unit, UPA, Stanley Kramer's production group, etc.) suggests that his thinking bore some "affiliation" with its cultural politics, even if we can not place a label on his actual political beliefs. This re-reading of the Popular Front as a "historical bloc," rather than as a organized political movement, may help to explain why many of Seuss's associates, who read this manuscript, felt uncomfortable with the term, "Popular Front" or its application to one or another of the contexts discussed here. Participants in such groups might or might not have seen themselves as contributing to the Popular Front, a political term in circulation during the period but only retrospectively ascribed to this "historical bloc" as a whole. For a contemporary account of his involvement with PM, see "Malace in Wonderland," *Newsweek*, February 9 1942, pp. 58-59. Largely forgotten today, Seuss's cartoons enjoyed broad circulation. They were republished in national news magazines, distributed by Nelson Rockefeller's Inter-American Affairs operation at the State Department, as well as employed by the Treasury Department in its Defense Bond campaign.
  35. After the war, Seuss worried that their address to the enlisted men had been too childish and simple-minded: "Being remote from the soldier, we tend to talk down the soldier when we should be talking with the soldier. His world is mud and we tend to talk to him from our world of clean sheets. The information we give him is the information he wants — and is greedy for — but we often irritate him by the way we present it." T.S. Geisel, Memo to Chief, Army Inform. Branch, IED, 5 Feb. 1945, *Seuss Papers*, Box 230, folder 34.
  36. T.S. Geisel, Memorandum to Chief, Special and Information Services, December 7, 1944, *Seuss Papers*, Box 230, Folder 29.
  37. Other participants in the lecture series included Vladimir Nabokov, Oscar Williams, and Wallace Stegner.
  38. Dr. Seuss, Lecture Notes, "Mrs. Mulvaney and the Billion Dollar Bunny," University of Utah Workshop, July 1947, *Seuss Papers*, Box 19, File 7.
  39. Lecture Notes, University of Utah Workshop, July 1947, *Seuss Papers*, Box 19, File 6.
  40. Seuss's focus on comic books in this lecture reflects the emergence of reformist campaigns leveled against the relationship between children and popular culture, most notably Dr. Frederic Wertham's campaign against the comics. Seuss clearly shared some, though not all, of Wertham's concerns. At the same time, he had himself been a cartoonist and popular humorist and had briefly published a comic strip for the *Hearst* newspapers. Seuss saw the opportunity for children's writers to engage with those themes and materials that made the comics so popular with children, while, in the process, reshaping children's tastes in a more palatable direction.
  41. T. S. Geisel, Final Continuity Script, *Your Job in Germany*, *Seuss Papers*, Box 9, File 6.
  42. Lecture Notes, University of Utah Workshop, July 1947, *Seuss Papers*, Box 19, File 6.
  43. For a fuller explication of the permissive conception of children's sensuality and sexuality, see Henry Jenkins, "The Sensuous Child," in Henry Jenkins (Ed.), *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, Forthcoming). This collection will also reprint some of the primary source materials cited in this essay.
  44. See, for example, Dorothy Baruch, *New Ways in Discipline: You and Your Child Today* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949).
  45. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
  46. See, for example, Elizabeth A. Boettiger, *Your Child Meets the World Outside: A Guide to Children's Attitudes in Democratic Living* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1941).
  47. Flacks, op. cit.
  48. Dorothy W. Baruch, *You, Your Children and War* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1942), pp. 90.
  49. See, also, Munro Leaf, *A Wartime Handbook for Young Americans* (Philadelphia: Stokes, 1942); Angelo Patri, *Your Child in Wartime* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1943). For additional background on American child-rearing during this period, see William M. Tuttle, Jr., "Daddy's Gone to War": *The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
  50. Henry Herbert Goddard, *Our Children in the Atomic Age* (Mellott, Indiana: Hopkins, 1948), p. iii.
  51. Dorothy W. Baruch, *The Glass House of Prejudice* (New York: William Morrow, 1946).
  52. Evelyn Emig Mellon, "Democracy Begins at Home," in Phylis B. Katz (Ed.), *The Child Care Guide and Family Advisor* (New York: Parent's Institute, 1960), pp. 515-520.

