

***The Lorax Redux: Profit Biggering and  
Some Selective Silences in American  
Environmentalism\****

*By Eliza Darling*

“Mister!” he said with a sawdusty sneeze,  
“I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.  
I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.  
And I’m asking you, sir, at the top of my lungs” —  
he was very upset as he shouted and puffed —  
“*What’s that THING you’ve made out of my Truffula tuft?*”

From *The Lorax*, by Dr. Seuss

**1. Of Totems, Tropes and Truffulas:  
Dr. Seuss and American Environmentalism**

While wandering about the library of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Science in 1998, I came upon a curious artifact in the photocopy room: “The Lorax says use both sides of the page!” exclaimed a sign above the Xerox machine. “The Lorax says recycle!” said another above the waste basket. The signs were hand-printed and appeared to have been taped to the wall almost as an afterthought by some environmentally conscientious work study student to remind library patrons to practice what passes for ecologically sound consumption as they make their way through the venerable halls of America’s first school of forestry. As a Marxist student of American environmental politics, this chance meeting with a character I had not encountered since childhood compelled me to wonder where else the

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elusive Lorax might turn up. A quick internet search produced in spades. The first try unearthed no less than a dozen Lorax sites with green motifs: “Celebrate Earth Day with The Lorax” ([www.randomhouse.com/seussville/titles/lorax/](http://www.randomhouse.com/seussville/titles/lorax/)); “The Lorax and Sustainable Development” ([www.tpwd.state.tx.us/edu/enved/lorax.htm](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/edu/enved/lorax.htm)); “The Lorax Environmental Club” ([www.ncsu.edu/stud\\_orgs/lorax/](http://www.ncsu.edu/stud_orgs/lorax/)). The content of these sites ranged from elementary school lesson plans to agendas for university-based environmental groups to a corporate advertisement offering training in forestry management.

*The Lorax*,<sup>1</sup> a children’s book written by the indomitable Dr. Seuss, is both a brilliant critique of the contradictions of industrial capitalism and a telling example of the social amnesia of American environmentalism. The quirky Seuss purportedly penned his environmental proclamation after becoming disenchanted with conservation propaganda which he found to be “dull, statistical and preachy.”<sup>2</sup> Since its first publication in 1971, it has been embraced by environmentally minded luminaries, citizens, organizations and corporations from Lady Bird Johnson to Keep America Beautiful, Inc., enjoying a particular renaissance during the corporate decadence of the 1980s. Its popularity, and its message, persisted through the last decade of the 20th century and promises to endure well into the next. In short, the figure of the Lorax has become a sort of totem of the mainstream American environmental movement. Its resonance with green-minded citizens requires some scrutiny.

## **2. Contradiction and Collapse: Industrial Production and Environmental Degradation**

*The Lorax* is a cautionary tale about the ecological evils of industrial production revolving around three primary characters: the Once-ler, a capitalist pioneer who narrates the story of his own downfall, the Lorax, a strange and mysterious guardian of the forest who warns the Once-ler of the impending ecological apocalypse, and a small unnamed boy, to whom the Once-ler unfolds the history of environmental degradation in the Truffula forest. The gist of the story is as follows: the boy happens upon the Once-ler’s abode (his “Lerkim”) “At the far end of town/where the grickle-grass grows/and the wind smells slow and sour when it blows.” The boy pays the Once-ler to tell him the story of the Lorax’s disappearance. As the tale unfolds, the reader is taken back to the first settlement of this landscape, which was

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 209.

originally covered by a great forest of Truffula Trees. The Once-ler, a proto-pioneer-capitalist figure, sets up a shop and begins producing commodities called “Thneeds” out of Truffula leaves. The Lorax, a small mustachioed dwarfish character, pops out of the stump of the first lobbed Truffula Tree, and warns the Once-ler: “I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees,” and for the various strange creatures which inhabit the Truffula forest. The Once-ler pays no heed, but continues production, eventually building a factory where he employs his Once-ler relatives in the making of Thneeds. As the business grows, the landscape gradually deteriorates under the pressures of deforestation and pollution. The animals leave, species by species, in search of an ecosystem which can sustain them. Finally, the Thneed factory consumes the last Truffula Tree; production collapses, the Once-ler’s relatives migrate, and the Lorax departs leaving only a small pile of stones inscribed with the word “Unless.” The moral of the story, the Once-ler tells the boy, is this: “UNLESS someone like you/cares a whole awful lot,/ nothing is going to get better./It’s not.” He entrusts the boy with the last of the Truffula seeds, telling him,

You’re in charge of the last of the Truffula seeds.  
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.  
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.  
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.  
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.  
Then the Lorax  
and all of his friends  
may come back.

What strikes the reader as remarkable about the tale is not merely Seuss’s uncanny faculty for capturing 500 years of industrialization, urbanization and environmental degradation in a few colorful and capricious pages, but his ability to describe the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production which eventually lead to its own collapse. No mere social critic, Seuss comes close (though, as we shall see, not quite close enough) to proving himself a veritable Karl Marx of children’s literature, and *The Lorax* is his manifesto. True to form, Seuss captures the dialectic of a mode of production which is constantly in flux, compelled to expand in order to survive. As such, his story is above all one of transformation, of raw nature into processed commodities, unspoiled beauty into contaminated ugliness, the Garden of Eden into a fetid cesspool.

The most notable transformation engendered by the development of industrial Thneed production takes place at the level of landscape. The book begins with a small boy making his way to the outskirts of a

dim, dank city to the Street of the Lifted Lorax. Listless, leafless trees droop sadly at the edge of the lane; a vulture-like bird hovers ominously overhead; a crescent moon gleams drearily through a murky sky. This baleful, post-apocalyptic backdrop provides the context for the tale of ruination about to unfold. As the Once-ler begins to recall his first sojourn to this now-dreadful landscape, the visual transformation is astonishing. The young Once-ler drives into a bright, Edenic countryside in a mule-drawn wagon, reminiscent of those of early American settlers, on a glorious summer morning. The green grass glows lushly under a bright blue sky; cheerful Truffula Trees toss their colorful tufts joyfully into the air; Bar-bal-loots, Swomee-Swans, and Humming-Fish frolic carelessly about the scene. The feeling evoked by the colors, postures and expressions is rapturous, harmonious, and innocent. Even the mule pulling the Once-ler Wagon smiles in content. There is not a building, a road, a telephone pole, or indeed any humanized structure in sight. The Once-ler's heart leaps with joy at the sight of the endless miles of (apparently unowned, unclaimed) Truffula Trees, and the thought of the productive, profit-generating uses to which they might be put. He at once sets about constructing what Hegel would term a "second nature" out of this unspoiled "first nature," first erecting a small shop, then felling a Truffula and knitting a Thneed, and finally building a radio-phone with which to summon all his Once-ler relatives to the site of production. Things go downhill rapidly from there. More buildings appear, then machines, then roads. Truffula stumps litter the increasingly barren landscape as one by one the Brown Bar-ba-loots, the Swomee-Swans, and the Humming-Fish are driven off in search of greener pastures. The sky grows progressively dimmer until it acquires a smoky grey hue; the grass turns from kelly green to a sickly shade of drab; the pond fills up with a poisonous slime. The entire landscape becomes shabby, dim and degraded, until finally the Lorax himself departs through a last blue hole in the smog. The Once-ler's tale at last catches up with the present, where the young boy perches atop the final enduring monument of the Lorax, the cairn inscribed by the Lorax with the word "Unless." Seuss's message is clear, and poignant: the excesses of industrial production have brought this landscape to the very edge of annihilation, but hope of restoration remains as long as the younger generation will heed the mistakes of its forefathers.

Seuss's depiction of capitalist growth is shrewd and biting. The production process undergoes a subtle if quick Taylorization. At first, the Once-ler controls the entire means of production: he innovates the Thneed concept, he owns the tools, he has access to the land, he builds

the factory, he chops down the trees, and he sews the Thneeds with his own hands. But once the first Thneed is sold, much to the chagrin of the Lorax and the astonished Bar-ba-loots, the Once-ler rushes to build a radio-phone in order to recruit his relatives as employees. The Once-ler clan members become the proletariat of the patriarch's familial capitalist maquiladora. Eventually the Once-ler, who began the process as a combination of inventor, engineer, producer and salesman, morphs into the capitalist "Once-ler-in-Chief," occupying a separate office marked "private" atop of a long flight of stairs, at the bottom of which the Brown Bar-ba-loots stand wretchedly holding their distended tummies for lack of nourishing Truffula fruits. Thneed technology also undergoes a rapid mechanization, from the simple hand-held axe used by the Once-ler to the Super-Axe-Hacker, "which whacked off four Truffula Trees at one smacker," increasing the rate of resource extraction fourfold. The faithful mule eventually disappears altogether and is replaced by a long sluice moving the trees from forest to factory and a fleet of pink and purple trucks carrying the Thneeds to market. A complex sewage system carries gluppity-glup (Thneed waste) from the factory and deposits it in the pond.

Seuss displays a remarkable sensibility about the relentless impulse toward capitalistic growth. Although he does not refer directly to urbanization in the text, the city makes an appearance at the very beginning of the story, and seems to be the home of the boy-cum-environmental-savior. The Thneed factory itself undergoes significant expansion during the tale, amounting at last to what appears to be a small company town. The Once-ler displays a thoroughly capitalist attitude toward the changes engendered by these developments. As the starving Bar-ba-loots set off in search of a new home, the Once-ler remarks, "I, the Once-ler, felt sad/as I watched them all go./BUT...business is business!/And business must grow/regardless of crummies in tummies, you know." Production eventually expands not just quantitatively but geographically, as the Once-ler adroitly seeks out new markets:

I meant no harm. I most truly did not.  
But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.  
I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.  
I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads  
of the Thneeds I shipped out. I was shipping them forth  
to the South! To the East! To the West! To the North!  
I went right on biggering...selling more Thneeds.  
And I biggered my money, which everyone needs.

The only aspects of growth that Seuss neglects are competition between individual capitals and the role of the state. But perhaps the biggery process itself holds the clue to these silences: maintaining control of all aspects of production, even down to the construction of roads for the transport of commodities, the Once-ler becomes the Rockefeller of the Thneed industry, a veritable monopoly based upon vertical consolidation from resource extraction to infrastructural control to product marketing. The state by its very absence seems complicit in the monopolization process, although the lack of an organized system of private property and the pioneer-like appearance of the Once-ler in seemingly uncharted Truffula territory suggests that the story unfolds in a frontier-like space where the state has not yet made its presence felt: the Truffula forest as the lost American west, the Lorax as American Indian guardian of the land, first subdued and eventually exterminated or driven off.

Seuss makes a wry comment on the capitalistic tendency to actively create new consumer needs. The Once-ler develops a comprehensive marketing strategy (“It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove. It’s a hat./But it has *other* uses. Yes far beyond that.”) designed to convince consumers that the Thneed is a versatile, must-have item. The Once-ler is amused by the skeptical Lorax’s lack of business savvy: “I laughed at the Lorax, ‘You poor stupid guy!/You never can tell what some people will buy,’” after a white chap in a blue business suit happens along and buys the first Thneed for three ninety-eight. The man makes off with his newly-acquired Thneed draped around his head (and, interestingly, obscuring his face) like a fur wrap; the Thneed is emblematic of conspicuous consumption. The logo borne by the Thneed delivery trucks is a veritable testament to the efficacy of capitalistic production of demand: “You Need a Thneed,” they insist as they roar off to meet the demands of distant Thneed markets.

Perhaps the most remarkable insight of *The Lorax* is Seuss’s comment on postindustrial society. Once the supply of Truffula Trees is exhausted, the Bar-ba-loots and the Swomee-Swans departed, the Thneed industry collapsed, and the Lorax apparently gone for good, two new commodities make an appearance: information, and nature itself. The boy who ventures to the Lerkim to talk to the Once-ler must pay him fifteen cents, a nail, and shell of a great-great-great grandfather snail in exchange for his story. In return, the boy receives a cautionary tale about the dangers of over-exploitation, and something else: a Truffula seed, the last one of them all. After arming his young disciple with the secret knowledge of impending ecological apocalypse, the Once-ler charges the boy with the care and nurturing of a new generation of

Truffula Trees. Nature destroyed has become nature recommoditized through produced scarcity and resource management, intellectual property rights and sustainable development become the potential subsidiary industries which might organize this capitalistic involution of nature writ large. One can almost imagine the scheming but repentant Once-ler hatching a new capitalistic plot in his Lerkim: environmental consulting? Forestry management? Biodiversity patenting? Humming-Fish restoration? Bar-ba-loot theme parks? In the post-apocalyptic, Truffula-scarce landscape, the possibilities for a new, profitable, guilt-free production of nature seem endless.

### **3. Selective Silences: Labor, Class, and the Human/Nature Divide**

The allure of *The Lorax* for environmentalists is not difficult to fathom. Seuss wraps many of the movement's favorite tropes — including apocalyptic alarmism, fuzzy anthropomorphism, consumer guilt, and redemptionist politics — into one grave-yet-whimsical, satirical-yet-optimistic, easy-to-digest package. The solution to Truffula deforestation is rational, modernist, simplistic, and it resonates keenly with two of the central tenets of Nature Conservancy-style environmentalism: restoration and preservation. Plant new trees, and then prevent them from being cut down and milled into commodities. This consumer-oriented, capital-friendly solution satisfies the demands of the American postwar liberal agenda, for it requires no radical transformation of the capitalist political economy to achieve its aims. Seuss critiques industrial production, but offers no plausible alternative for attending to society's material needs. He leaves the reader to *assume* that capitalistic production may proceed apace as long as certain modifications are made, such as the construction and maintenance of untouchable forest preserves or the replanting of harvested landscapes. Seuss declines to address how such strategies work out in reality. In this regard, *The Lorax* is typically emblematic of the selective silences of liberal American environmentalism with regard to issues of labor, production, and class.

But its omissions begin foremost with Seuss's depiction of nature itself. The first and most obvious incongruity may be found in Seuss's pre-Once-ler Truffula forest, where the Swomee-Swans, Bar-ba-loots and Humming-Fish frolic in Edenic harmony amidst a landscape of bountiful plenty. There appears to be no competition for resources in this ecosystem. The fauna are certainly not devouring each other; indeed everyone appears to be a vegetarian. Even the Truffula fruits seem to leap joyfully into the mouths of the Brown Bar-ba-loots. Neither death nor decay haunt the Truffula forest; this is no Darwinian space where

natural selection weeds out those whose traits are ill-suited to their shifting ecological niches. While debates in ecology circles over the predominance of competition or cooperation among organisms certainly continue to rage,<sup>3</sup> the point is that change itself seems alien to the Seussian environment. If Seuss's portrait of the Truffula forest rings a bell, it is probably because it is reminiscent of the tale of ecological balance told by the preservationists of the American wilderness movement, who would portray "environment" as a pristine, uncontaminated place where humans (and Once-lers) do not belong.

Yet naturalists since at least Darwin have come to cast a skeptical eye upon the ideology of pristine nature-in-balance, interrogating the very notion of environmental stability. Most recently, chaos theorists have carried this scrutiny further, questioning whether cultural assumptions have imposed an order upon natural processes that does not conform to a quite disorderly and unpredictable reality. And it is not only preservationist politics which appeal to such notions of balance. Restoration ecology, offered as an alternative to (or in conjunction with) preservation, employs the same sort of slippage suggested by the Once-ler at the end of his story, for it implies that there is a mythical Edenic epoch to which we can "all" agree that nature should be restored. And it begs the question: what came before the Truffula forest reached this idyllic stage? How would it have changed if the Once-lers had not colonized it? Can first nature ever truly be resuscitated once it is gone?

That uniquely Euro-American distinction between wilderness and civilization has been noted with skepticism by several social critics. "For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth," writes environmental historian William Cronon, following in the footsteps of Roderick Nash.<sup>4</sup> Yet wilderness in reality is "quite profoundly a human creation."<sup>5</sup> Marxist critics have gone beyond Cronon's depiction of wilderness as "the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history"<sup>6</sup> to suggest that geography is a material and discursive manifestation of

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<sup>3</sup>Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup>William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

particular *modes of production*. “Capitalist society must of necessity create a physical landscape — a mass of humanly constructed physical resources — in its own image, broadly appropriate to the purposes of production and reproduction,” argues David Harvey in *The Urbanization of Capital*.<sup>7</sup> The vanished *Truffula* forest may therefore be understood as part and parcel of the capitalist geography of uneven development.<sup>8</sup> Yet wilderness management, restoration and preservation are as much a product of capitalist development as degradation, extinction, and exploitation. Far from constituting a stalwart bulwark against the consumption of nature by the forces of industrial production, wilderness “preservation” has become a familiar trope of late 20th century capitalist geography, accepted and even embraced by many capitalistic interests in the stampede to corporate greenwash.

Drawing on the work of Timothy Luke<sup>9</sup> and Wes Jackson,<sup>10</sup> geographer Cindi Katz remarks that the apparently well-intentioned cordoning off of wilderness remnants into protected preserves belies both a problematic ideology and an ill-conceived ecology. Wilderness in this instance serves as a lost idol, an “artifact of civilization” to be worshiped in retrospective guilt for an earlier mistreatment. But such plans can also lead to the intensification of environmental degradation outside the protected zone, particularly on its borders. Even more disturbing, Katz recognizes in both the language and intent of post-1970s wilderness preservation schemes — particularly those aimed by northern environmentalists at the species-rich biomes of southern tropical forests — a new accumulation strategy for capital: biodiversity must be protected not simply for some nebulous greater good, but for future mining efforts by pharmaceutical companies, genome projects, and cloning corporations.<sup>11</sup> *Truffula* Trees may indeed be “what

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<sup>7</sup>David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (New York: Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>9</sup>Timothy Luke, “The Nature Conservancy or the Nature Cemetery: Buying and Selling ‘Perpetual Care’ as Environmental Resistance,” *CNS*, 6, 2, June 1995.

<sup>10</sup>Wes Jackson, “Nature as the Measure for a Sustainable Agriculture,” in F.H. Bormann and S.R. Kellert, eds., *Ecology, Economics, Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>Cindi Katz, “Whose Nature, Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the ‘Preservation’ of Nature,” in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, eds. *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

everyone needs,” but they are especially useful for industries looking to the medical, cosmetic, and genetic potential of nature to turn a profit. Business *is* business, and business *must* grow. Though Seuss penned his manifesto on the very eve of the environmental involution of which Katz speaks, the current generation of children (and adults) digests the Once-ler’s tale in an age saturated by the language of corporate environmentalism, from the greenwashing tactics of Dupont to Saturn to The Body Shop. Organic pesticides, recycled cars, and eco-friendly shampoos have become the Thneeds of post-industrial American consumption.

In the meantime, the environmental movement has invented other Loraxes. Anthropologists, for instance, have commented upon the problematic alliances forged between Euro-American environmentalists and indigenous groups. Conklin and Graham note that such collusions are frequently based upon environmental activists’ assumption that fourth world peoples constitute “ecologically noble savages,” or pure, innocent, *natural* figures whose cultures and experiences are keenly in tune with the rhythms of their environments.<sup>12</sup> As some such groups have discovered, indigeneity holds a great deal of political currency in the wake of post-1968 identity politics. For their part, indigenous groups such as the Kayapo and Xavante of the Amazon have made alliance with environmentalists, seeking international publicity and support in their struggles for sovereignty. Some, such as the Kayapo, have managed to expertly manipulate western assumptions about their purported role as guardians-of-the-forest, appealing to global concerns about deforestation, hosting jaunts through the Amazon with green-minded international pop stars, and appearing at political gatherings in full indigenous regalia. The trouble begins, however, when it becomes clear that indigenous demands for control over their own land do not necessarily coincide with the plans environmentalists envision for the forest. Sovereignty and preservation, in other words, do not always correspond. Nor are indigenous people always free to choose their own fate, much less the fate of their forests, even when they do hold title to ancestral lands. Far from being a forgotten people passed over by the tides of time, they too feel the bite of capitalist oppression as the forces of the regional, national and international political economy constrict their lives and livelihoods. Even when such groups are inclined toward the preservationist impulse, as inhabitants of a highly globalized

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<sup>12</sup>Beth Conklin, and Laura Graham, “The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics,” *American Anthropologist*, 97, 4, 1996.

capitalist economy, they must act within boundaries defined by the motion of capital operating on multiple scales.

So it is with the Once-ler workers. Beyond the facile separation of human and non-human, historian Richard White detects in American environmentalism a deeply-entrenched hostility toward laboring in nature: “Environmentalists usually imagine that when people who make things finish their day’s work, nature is the poorer for it. Nature seems safer when shielded from human labor,”<sup>13</sup> and Seuss’s story bears out this suspicion. Protecting Truffula Trees from “axes that hack” is precisely the reformed Once-ler’s message. Therein lies the most disturbing silence of Seuss’s tale. His depictions of the laborers who work in the Thneed factory are downright alarming. Like the Once-ler himself, they are all faceless; the reader sees only their green and scaly arms, hands, and occasionally a pair of glaring yellow eyes. Like the indigenous inhabitants of the Truffula forest, they are genderless, raceless and ethnically homogeneous, but unlike their “natural” counterparts the Bar-ba-loots and Swomee-Swans, their forms are reminiscent not of charismatic megafauna like birds and bears, but of lizards or monsters. Their dark limpid color seems out of place amidst the bright yellows and blues and pinks of the Truffula forest, and indeed as the environment progressively degrades its colors shift to look more and more like that of the Once-ler workers themselves. They seem to have contaminated the forest not only through their productive activities, but through their very presence; they are disruptive aliens in this harmonious place of singing Swans and bouncing Bar-ba-loots. Interestingly, near the end of the tale when the factory closes down, the laborers migrate, presumably in search of sustaining wage work elsewhere, much as the Swomee-Swans and the Bar-ba-loots before them. Seuss, however, makes no mention of the possible crummies-in-tummies experienced by the workers as they lose their jobs, nor their need for clean air, water and shelter. In fact, Seuss avoids any mention of the living conditions of the workers, though it seems conceivable that they might be drinking the same polluted water and breathing the same smogged-up air that compelled the indigenous inhabitants of the forest to abandon their homes.

Nor does the text mention what needs compelled the laborers to the Thneed factory in the first place, though perhaps they, like the Bar-ba-loots, were driven off the landscape by forces beyond their control. The only inkling we have comes from the call put in by the Once-ler to his

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<sup>13</sup>Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist Or Do You Work for a Living? Work and Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 172.

kin: “Here’s a wonderful chance for the whole Once-ler Family to get mighty rich.” It is only the Once-ler, however, who is freed from his labors by the wonders of industrial technology; the rest of the family runs the Thneed factory, lobbing trees, stitching Thneeds, transporting them to market. What feelings and thoughts, if any, these workers hold toward the landscape their labor helped to degrade are left unspoken. And perhaps the irony of being compelled to destroy one’s own habitat for a wage is a paradox Seuss — who once drew advertisements for a pesticide produced by Standard Oil — could well understand.<sup>14</sup>

If Seuss nails down the process of capitalist production, he is less inquisitive or astute about the role of consumption. In many ways, Seuss sets up a straw man with the creation of the Thneed. While capitalist industry assuredly produces many non-essential luxury items, the matter of satisfying real human requirements, from food to shelter to clothing to health care, cannot lightly be tossed aside, particularly when the moral of the story points to the inability of other species to survive as humans consume or destroy all sustaining elements of landscape. The hidden countenance of the one well-heeled consumer who makes an appearance in the story, as well as the throngs of unseen customers purchasing Thneeds at market, functions in much the same way as the faceless workers. We connect with the Bar-ba-loots, Swomee-Swans and Humming-Fish not merely because they are mythical approximations of cuddly charismatic megafauna, but because we witness their suffering. The animals look sad, sick and dejected as they leave their homes — indeed one of the Bar-ba-loots has become so weakened by hunger that he must be carried away by his comrades. It is easier for Seuss’s readers to ignore human suffering if they needn’t look it in the eye. And the alienation of capitalist life allows us to do so; we avert our gaze from the homeless woman on the urban street corner, malnourished Third World children on television, abused and exploited workers both here and abroad. Had the Once-ler produced some other commodity out of Truffula trees, such as wood for housing, fruits for food, fuel for warmth, or paper for whimsical children’s books, perhaps it would be less easy to condemn the Truffula loggers for their productive activities. Had we seen the producers feeding their families with the wages gleaned at the Truffula factory, or consumers wrapping

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<sup>14</sup>Warren T. Greenleaf, “How the Grinch Stole Reading: The Serious Nonsense of Dr. Seuss,” in Thomas Fensch, ed., *Of Sneeches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodore Geisel* (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), p. 92.

their children in Thneeds to keep them warm, we might have been similarly reticent to so quickly denounce them.

Such contradictions were not lost on Seuss himself, nor on some of his readers. In 1989, *The Lorax* became the target of an unsuccessful book-banning campaign in the logging community of Laytonville, California.<sup>15</sup> Seuss reacted indignantly to the suggestion that the story was anti-logging: “*The Lorax* doesn’t say lumbering is immoral. I live in a house made of wood and write books printed on paper. It’s a book about going easy on what we’ve got. It’s antipollution and antigreed.”<sup>16</sup> Seuss’s purported inspiration for writing *The Lorax*, however, intimates a certain reactionary NIMBYism. According to his biographers, Seuss began contemplating writing what he called “straight [environmental] propaganda”<sup>17</sup> while looking out his studio window at the over-developed shores of his coastal San Diego home. His artistic impulse impaired by the press of glittering condominiums around him, Seuss and his wife departed for Kenya, where his creative block was finally broken while relaxing poolside at the Mt. Kenya Safari Club by the sudden appearance of a herd of elephants on a distant ridge. Seuss wrote most of *The Lorax* in Africa, even drawing inspiration for his Truffula Trees from Serengeti flora. Seuss expressed his slow-growth sentiments financially as well as artistically. He went to great lengths to prevent construction on the land surrounding his California home, purchasing adjacent real estate for hundreds of thousands of dollars as a buffer against development.<sup>18</sup> In short, despite his fairly complex grasp of the internal workings of capitalist growth, and despite the book’s popularity with sustainable development proponents, Seuss appears to have clung to an escapist liberal approach to confronting capitalism’s environmental consequences.

And here is where Seuss’s Marxian impulse fails. By selectively ignoring the necessity of laboring in nature, by recognizing the Bar-ba-loots’s but not the Once-lers’ compulsion to survive, by vilifying the working class for seeking sustenance in nature, Seuss skips lightly over a fundamental reality recognized by Marx. Labor, Marx argued, constitutes the mediating mechanism between humans and nature in a continuing, unavoidable metabolic dialogue. As biological creatures, human beings really do need Thneeds, in the form of food, clothing, shelter, medicine and warmth, and all societies must develop a division

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<sup>15</sup>Alison Lurie, “The Cabinet of Dr. Seuss,” in *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Morgan and Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

of labor by which to extract these things from nature. All commodities, down to the very pages of Seuss's book, originate in nature, extracted, processed and delivered by human labor. To neglect this dialectic is to deny the very naturalness of human existence, and to conceive a pipe-dream environmentalism based not upon productive, respectful engagement with nature, but upon a mythical separation between "us" and "it." Seuss recognizes that the biggery of profit drives the abuse of Truffulas trees by capital, but fails to recognize that the same principle applies to Once-ler workers. Nature and labor alike are both indispensable (as the collective means of production) and expendable (as individuals with needs of their own) from capital's point of view. The crime committed by Thneed capitalism is not only one against nature, but against humans as well. Unlike nature, however — and the passive and powerless Lorax, who can only point his finger and scold, exemplifies this nicely — labor can collectively, sentiently struggle to shift the balance of power and halt capital's exploitation of both humans and their habitat. The power to reverse the exploitation of both nature and labor lies not with the Lorax, or some idealized "revenge of nature," but with the Thneed workers, who could have suspended, seized, and reorganized production at the Thneed factory. In short, it is difficult to conceive how human communities can adopt a less exploitative relationship with nature — one based upon conscientious forethought rather than blind profit, one which prioritizes use value over exchange value — without simultaneously developing a less exploitative relationship between themselves.

#### **4. Why All the Fuss?**

Why bother deconstructing a children's book? Speaking of straw-men, isn't it a bit too easy (not to mention cynical) to attack the whimsical, wonderful, beloved creator of *The Cat in the Hat* and *Yertle the Turtle*? *The Lorax* is, after all, a fictional story for children. Why not set one's critical sites on problematic books written for adults, which are meant to be weighed with a measure of gravity? Why not *The Population Bomb*, or *The Biophilia Hypothesis*? There are several reasons for taking green children's literature seriously — perhaps even more seriously than so-called adult literature. Ever since Seuss's own *Cat in the Hat* sounded the (well-deserved) death-knell of Dick and Jane, it has been recognized by parents, teachers, librarians and literary critics that children are capable of confronting a great deal more complexity than adults typically give them credit for. Indeed, amidst the constant stream of simplistic and Disneyesque patronizing and pandering, a far deeper strain of American children's literature has endured in the work of such authors as Seuss and Maurice Sendak, whose books tackle such

intense social and psychological issues as death, war, authority, rebellion, sickness and abandonment. Children's books should be (and have been) approached seriously because they frequently deal with serious matters in subtle and complex ways, and are absorbed into the psyche at a decidedly impressionable period in people's lives. If environmental degradation is important enough for a brilliant and revolutionary author like Seuss to take on, then it is worth taking on in all its diverse complexity. And then there is the astounding popularity of Dr. Seuss himself. Since his death in 1991, his books have continued to sell phenomenally worldwide in multiple languages. He is rightly celebrated as the most important and enduring figure in American children's literature, and his message promises to imprint itself upon the minds of many future generations of readers young and old.

What rankles, however, is not so much the lesson children learn from *The Lorax* as the American environmental movement's seemingly unproblematic embracing of its meaning. *The Lorax* resonates with liberal environmentalism because it affirms the latter's facile assumption that nature can be saved by excluding humans — and especially workers — from it. The problem with nature preserves lies not in the act of preventing forests from becoming strip malls *per se*, but in the way preservation works out in a geography organized around capitalistic private property. Places like the U.S. national parks are becoming islands in a sea of rampant development, and this has several consequences. Firstly, ecological pressures on these places are increasing precisely due to the fact of their uniqueness. The degradation of the landscapes in which humans live and work on a daily basis appears to be increasing the hunger for more authentically “natural” encounters with authentically “wild” places — defined by the preservationists themselves as spaces where human beings are conspicuously absent as permanent residents. Various forms of capital have moved to monopolize upon the wilderness cache (who can experience the Rockies without a thirty thousand-dollar SUV or the Adirondacks without a million-dollar lakefront “camp?”), further fueling the consumer demand for pristine nature. This leads not to a virtuous circle but to an ironic circle in which *wilderness scarcity* compels *wilderness preservation* which results in increased *wilderness consumption*, restoring undesirable *wilderness scarcity*, with supposedly nature-friendly corporations skimming the profits from this created demand all the while. Secondly, the focus on particularly precious landscapes springs from a decidedly liberal approach to environmental preservation based upon guilt for past abuses of nature rather than a

more realistic and comprehensive management of ecology in general, as well as pointing to a nasty politics of class and race: why should so much effort be poured into preserving Denali when the South Bronx is allowed to become so contaminated that children who grow up there frequently incur debilitating lung problems? Does preserving one swath of forest land in Alaska or Colorado really compensate for the unchecked exploitation of other landscapes, particularly in the Third World? Finally, and most importantly, ecological management based upon private property lines drawn on a map make absolutely no sense in terms of nature itself. Even in the United States, the continued integrity of protected spaces, from Yosemite to Tongass to the Adirondacks, remains in constant doubt, not because of what happens *within* their borders, but because of ecological pressures such as global warming and acid rain, which originate in places far from the preserves themselves.

Wilderness preserves are not necessarily reactionary projects. Preservation becomes a problem only when it acts as a comprehensive ideology underlying social responses to global environmental degradation. The notion, especially popular with many conservation biologists, that nature can be “saved” only when cordoned off and separated from the process of human production is a self-defeating argument because such a “rescue” imposes a fragmented geopolitics upon a complex and integrated biosphere. As long as human affairs remain internal to a universal nature, which at this point in history includes the very capitalistic production techniques critiqued by Seuss, the externalizing politics of liberal environmental silence will serve only to shift degradation to other landscapes rather than addressing it as a totalizing reality. Is it sufficient to grow another *Truffula* forest, even a highly protected one, while the seas of capitalism threaten to engulf it on all sides, a potential sacrificial offering on the almighty altar of profit-biggering? Seuss’s silences, and those of the environmental movement which has embraced him, do not tell.