‘A Child’s Mind as a Blank Book’: Myth, Childhood, and the Corporation

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I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.

*Walt Disney (n.d., Giroux 1999: 17)*

Disneyland: a space of the regeneration of the imaginary as waste-treatment plants are [where] the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imaginary of children... is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization.

*Jean Baudrillard (1981: 14)*

Children's Reading and Children's Thinking are the rock-bottom base on which this country will rise. Or not rise... books for children have a greater potential for good, or evil, than any other form of literature on earth.

*Dr. Seuss (1960: 11)*

Children's literature... is not like myth. It is myth. Children's literature is not a source of information about social structures of subjectivity [but] the very site of their emergence. Children's literature is not a series of texts about the law. It is a source of law.

*Desmond Manderson (2003: 9)*

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1 This paper is for Michael Freeman, friend and mentor, who grasps at straws. He does not desperately clutch at them, or construct specious arguments from them, or overburden camels with last ones. He uses them to tell early which way a wind blows. Telling the winds has made him a pioneer in many fields of legal study, not least the promise and profundity of children's rights. My University of Manitoba colleagues Evaristus Oshen-ebo and John Pozios gave me insight into reforming the corporate conscience. The Legal Research Institute lent support. An early version of this paper was given at the Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative & Feminism and Legal Theory Project Workshop, 'Corporate Rights versus Children's Interests', University of British Columbia, 19 and 20 October 2012.
Introduction

Walt Disney, master of marketing, saw in the child a blankness, an empty book to be filled, an innocence to be manipulated, in the cause of his corporate vision. Dr. Seuss, master of the sideways moral, saw stories for children as the most potent of all forms of literature (McGillivray, 2014). Awakened to the power of story by WWII and the US bombing of Japan (Nel, 2001), off to new start with his fable *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), Seuss knew that ‘the new generations must grow up to be more intelligent than ours’. The Seussian child sees things that others do not and opposes arbitrary and unjust authoritarianism. For Desmond Manderson (2003: 9), stories are the legal texts of childhood.

For if childhood is a province of myth, and if myth itself is to be understood as central to the origin of our understanding of society and law, then the mythological elements of children’s stories ought themselves to be regarded as an essential site for the emergence of particular understandings of law (*ibid*, 7).

The Child in literature for children is a child of the Enlightenment, born of Locke and Rousseau whose philosophies propelled a profound shift in how we see childhood and how we govern children. In the New Childhood of the late 17th century, the child came under tutorial surveillance, depictions of the family in art and philosophy centred around children, and childhood became explicitly about itself. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the state sought to shape the child in the production of citizenship. Through the school, the family, and the clinic, by manipulating images of the family and activating parental guilt and desire, children were to be made fit subjects of law. Myth and law were once contiguous. The child to whom a vast body of stories in a multiplicity of media is directed is the Child at the heart of myth. Here she may appear as Wisdom, Mediator, Messenger, or protagonist. The mythic element of stories for children brings law into the child’s shaping of her self and empowers her to cope with the complexities of the everyday. As tales of origin and return, betrayal and reconciliation, justice and love, stories constitute the legal texts of childhood.

Beneath childhood now flows a current more powerful than any state or storyteller. This is the power of the corporation, whose reach into childhood combines story-telling as ad-myth with the knowledges of the clinic. Governing childhood over the past two centuries was located in the family, the school, and the regulatory state, informed by the psy sciences. The primary locus is now the corporation. Children are no longer shaped in the production of citizenship but in the production of consumption. ‘To convert (a state body) into an independent commercial company’ is to corporatise (Shorter Oxford, 1993). Childhood is corporatised. It is a new New Childhood in which myth is deeply attenuated and, with it, the child’s power over her childhood, over who she is and will be, in an inverse ratio to the enhancement of her power as consumer. Her dreams are corporate dreams. Her childhood is an exploitable commodity. The unsurpassed learning powers of children – their minds no blank book but books informed by the rich and complex cultural and genetic heritage of the hu-