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Narratives of Sesame Street: Music, Memory, and Meaning

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NARRATIVES OF SESAME STREET: MUSIC, MEMORY, AND MEANING

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I dedicate this to my mother, who watched *Sesame Street* with me while writing her dissertation;
to my father, for hours of editing and hours of “Mahna Mahna;” and to all the members of my
generation who spent part of their childhood growing up on *Sesame Street*.

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ABSTRACT

Sesame Street, the longest continuously-running children's television show in the United States, has become iconic because of its characters and skits, but also for its music. For several generations, viewers of *Sesame Street* not only remember the music; upon hearing the songs again, they remember the conversations and revelations that they originally experienced while watching the program as children. The music recalls vividly a time they describe as having shaped their views on a variety of matters, including childhood, music, education, society, and the process of growing up. In this thesis, I explore how the music of *Sesame Street* functions as a site for cultural memory among young adults, based on information drawn from two focus group sessions in which individuals who watched *Sesame Street* as children came together to view and comment upon musical segments from the show.

The thesis is divided into four sections. The introduction provides background information about *Sesame Street*, the related literature, and this project. The second chapter, “Sing a Song: ABCs, 1-2-3s, and a Primary Musical Education,” explores the general academic content of *Sesame Street* songs and then contextualizes their impact in terms of individual stories and reactions to the segments. The third chapter, “The Count is Jewish?” A Discourse on Diversity” addresses a recurring thread of discussion throughout the two sessions—how race and ethnicity were presented in the songs of *Sesame Street* and how this informed the individuals’ watching of the show, both as children and as adults. Themes central to this chapter are portrayal, perception, and modern political correctness with regards to race.

The final chapter, “Shared Pasts, Shared Presents: How Memories of *Sesame Street* Build Community,” elaborates on the idea of memory and the formation of identity, focusing on where and how the subjects of this study encounter and experience *Sesame Street* in their adult lives, and how they interacted in mixed groups using the music from this television show as the central point of discussion. The chapter also weaves together the individual debates presented in chapters two and three to explore the nature of *Sesame Street* as a mass-mediated musical object, and how the re-viewing of this shared culture has allowed for individuals to draw their own conclusions about how this music played an active role in their childhoods and beyond. In sum, the study represents a case study of cultural memory vis-à-vis the music of a specific television

show while potentially shedding light on larger issues of the relationship between individual and collective memory within the framework of a shared cultural experience.

INTRODUCTION

“CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET TO *SESAME STREET*?”

The children’s television show *Sesame Street* has earned its place in the American public sphere—due to its longevity, numbers of viewers, awards, and the controversies it has raised. As a researcher, it is a tricky undertaking to approach topics like this that hold such a central place in the minds of individuals within a society because of the strong opinions that one will encounter during research and the assumption that such a topic must already be well-explored. When I was sharing my project with friends and colleagues, the first question I was often asked, after an initial burst of enthusiasm for the show itself, was “Why specifically *music* in *Sesame Street*?” The simple answer was that music from this program has played a central role in my life, both as a child and as an adult. The acknowledgement of this interest and explanation of my position in reference to this material played a crucial part in identifying the purpose of this project, and thenceforth for developing an appropriate theory and methodology that would suit my needs as a researcher and the project as a whole.

From the time of my earliest memories to about the age of seven, I was a *Sesame Street* girl. It was my television show of choice when I was young--even after I had discovered that there were channels other than PBS (Public Broadcasting Service). I was inseparable from my “Bee-bah,” as I called a stuffed animal Big Bird that still sits, well-worn and well-loved, on my bedroom shelf. I had Bert and Ernie slippers that had to be pried from my feet while I was sleeping so that they could be washed, and a large collection of *Sesame Street* song tapes that are now nearly worn through. However, more important than these material signs of devotion to the show were the memories I carried away from my watching, especially memories of songs, that still pervade my adult frame of knowledge and set of cultural references.

These ongoing cultural references within my own life were what initially inspired me to begin investigating *Sesame Street* and memory. Within my own family, references to *Sesame Street* had become subsumed into a sort of family language. One example of this that we still use is a reference to the 1988 faux music video “The Word is No.” This two-minute song, obviously meant to teach the meaning of the word “no,” shows both Muppet and human characters attempting to perform various activities but being stopped by the word “no,” while the

verses detail what it is that they are forbidden to do. (“No parking/no biking/no swimming/no hiking...”) Although I had long forgotten the details of the lyrics, the tune and the chorus, “And the word is no” remained in my mind because in my family’s parlance, any unreasonable request would be met by someone singing that chorus.

More broadly, I realized how diverse in educational topics and musical styles the collected songs of *Sesame Street* really were. From my critical adult perspective, I could see how they addressed academic standards (ABCs and 1-2-3s, among other things), racial and cultural identities, as well as attempting to teach daily life skills, such as eating healthy foods. As a scholar of music, I noticed the diversity of genres and artists that appeared in these musical segments. Moreover, I could directly pinpoint certain things that I had learned from the songs of *Sesame Street* as a child—everything from learning the continents (in alphabetical order, no less) to the meaning of the word “amphibian.” I began to wonder what others of my generation had obtained, had really *learned*, from listening to and watching the show, and this formed the basis of my work.

As I began my research into the historical literature about *Sesame Street*, it became clear to me that not only did most studies ignore music’s role in the show entirely, they were concerned with purely quantitative measures of the program’s teaching ability, often measured as a level of performance on some standardized test later in the childhood period. It seemed that it would be inescapable for me to try to somehow capture in my study individuals’ recreations, from their adult memories, some pure measure of what, precisely, children had taken away from watching Muppets dance around and sing catchy lyrics. But how could one so neatly separate what has happened in the past and a set of memories about the past? It was a conundrum.

Then, as I continued to work with this material and those who remembered it, I realized that the quantitative approach, although useful in some frameworks, could not and would not capture the intricacies of memory, especially childhood memory, as it has played in the minds of individuals for over two decades. I took heart from a passage by ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice in which he states that “The truth that music embodies and symbolically represents is not a propositional, logical truth, verifiable by the niceties of epistemological reflection and explanation, but an existential, ontological truth that sensation, memory, and imagination coalesce into a memorable experience.” (Rice 1994, 305) I understood then that a great measure

of truth could be achieved by turning on the television and listening as my friends and colleagues commented and sang along.

CHAPTER I

ANALYZING AMERICA'S MUSICAL STREET: FORTY YEARS AND COUNTING

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the music of *Sesame Street* functions as a site for cultural memory among young adults. As the longest continuously-running children's television show in the United States, *Sesame Street* has become iconic not only because of its characters and skits, but also through its music. Walk into a room crowded with individuals of certain generations and begin singing a song from the show, and it is likely that some of the people will begin to sing along. However, these individuals do not only recognize the songs; they are also inspired to revisit the conversations and revelations that they originally experienced while watching the program as children, and these they may describe as having shaped their views on a variety of matters, including music, education, society, and the process of growing up. Bringing these remembrances to light in a group atmosphere additionally uncovers cultural ties between individuals who may not at first group themselves primarily as "*Sesame Street* fans," but then may begin to identify with other such individuals after sharing their memories.

My primary methodology involved bringing together a group of individuals who, by virtue of their age range, social demographic, and personal histories, shared a common past as former viewers of *Sesame Street*. I fostered a focus group-style¹ environment for a group of young adults aged 18-30 with the aim to "jog" their memories about the program before, during, and after viewing selected musical segments from the show. They were asked during this two-hour window of viewing and talking to share their memories of the music of *Sesame Street*. The results, as collected and analyzed in this thesis, reflect their personal remembrances and the groups' interaction. These results have been compiled in a way to better understand how this

¹Using focus groups is a type of methodology that is generally closely associated with research in politics, medicine, and consumer fields to gather information. The groups usually consist of around ten people and are slightly mediated by a moderator. The information that is gathered from these sessions can be quantitative, but is more often broadly qualitative—for example, a focus group could be used to gather opinions and experiences on a political candidate or a new drug. The benefit of using a focus group is to gather together individuals who have had similar experiences, but not in the same geographic or temporal locations.

music has influenced these individuals in their thinking as they have grown to adults, as well as how having participated in this popular culture musical phenomenon as children may create a sense of community between individuals who previously may not have identified themselves as a community. Thus, this thesis represents a case study of cultural memory vis-à-vis the music of a specific television show while potentially shedding light on larger issues of the relationship between individual and collective memory within the framework of a shared cultural experience.

The scope of this study is limited in several ways. From the beginning, it must be established that the thoughts and recollections of the study participants are located firmly in the present—although they are discussing how they understood a song in their childhood, this remembrance, like all varieties of oral history, is colored by the needs and perceptions of the present. By the very act of learning about and consenting to participate in this study, the focus group participants had already been prompted to consider *Sesame Street* specifically from the angle of its musical legacy.

Additionally, the small sample size, the limited time frame of the study (two hours per each group of people), the group environment, and the fact that the groups were drawn from a selection of individuals who are presently residing in the same geographic location may have created a group that is more homogenous in reaction than the general population. Indeed, the fact alone that these individuals are pursuing university education may have influenced the critical nature of these results more than anything else. However, given the broad range of childhood homes of the individuals, the diversity of the experiences that they shared, and the fact that similar comments were made by a more randomized selection of individuals on Internet forums suggests that the thoughts and experiences of this group can be considered a cross-section of *Sesame Street*'s musical impact as a whole, and help to explain the wider *Sesame Street* musical phenomenon.

This exploration can contribute to the ethnomusicological literature in several areas: music and television, children's music, and music and cultural memory. In subject matter, this study is novel in that it veers away from studying music in the television medium as only a means to advance plot or provide characterization; instead, music, with its visual accoutrements, is considered as the primary source of entertainment and educational value. Further, instead of only studying music in the context of relationships and narrative action within the television

show, I explore how this music, mediated by the television show, affected individuals' lives, and has created some sense of community and shared experience among individuals who have no previous shared experiences.

Finally, the most important aspect of this project is how it addresses music and memory in a popular culture context, and the ability of the memories of individuals to later create communities. The action in *Sesame Street* is for the most part set on, well, Sesame Street, a fictional street in a fictional New York City neighborhood. While not limited by race, age, gender, or other identity markers, the sense of “neighborhood” is conscribed by a clear sense of place. In contrast, the show *Sesame Street* has been broadcast across America and the world, thus creating a set of individuals who are linked by the *Sesame Street* experience, familiar with its teaching patterns and tropes, and to some extent indoctrinated by its ideals. These individuals so linked (who then identify positively with this experience) I term a “community,” based on commonalities in thought, opinion, and experience that was fostered by *Sesame Street*. In this study, however, the idea of community is twofold: the physical space in which these individuals interact not only outlines the invisible bonds of the ideological community, but creates a physical community, if one that is only temporary. By fostering this community of individuals who have shared this certain life experience² and providing them with the tools to revive their memories, the methodology of this thesis has enabled me to examine how *Sesame Street* has functioned as mediated popular culture in forming personal memories and opinions, as well as assessing how this music can be seen to join Americans together into a temporary, physically manifested community whose only commonality relative to the study may have been watching the show as children.

Background

As mentioned earlier, *Sesame Street* (1969-present) is the longest continuously running children's television show broadcast in North America. Now airing in its original version or in a locally co-produced version in 120 different countries, the show has been watched by an

² Similar in key regards to, for example, the study discussed in Bakan et. al, 2008.

estimated 74 million children in the United States and has received 109 Emmy awards, more than any other television show. Although it has sometimes been criticized for its educational content and pedagogical methods both by children's education specialists and in the popular press (for example, see Healy 1999), the program has also been lauded for its innovative and effective ways of teaching children, and has become standard fare for young children (for example, Bogarts and Ball 1971). When the television era began in the mid-1940s, the medium was in many ways a visual extension of radio broadcasting. There were news shows, variety shows, and, from the very beginning, shows created especially for children. Beginning with such classics as *Howdy Doody*, children's television programming quickly blossomed into a full array of children's westerns, clown shows, and variety shows in the 1950s and expanded to cartoons and superhero shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Along with this expansion of television fare came increased advertising on the networks and increasing violence within the shows themselves, which led to more stringent regulations on television content by the Federal Communications Commission during the 1960s and a call for non-violent, educational shows for children to be aired on television.

When *Sesame Street* began to air in 1969, it was not the only American children's show that had attempted an educational agenda. *Mr. Wizard* (1951-1965) introduced children to fundamentals of science through experiments; in *The Ding Dong School* (1952-1956), professor of education Dr. Francis Horwich instructed children on proper behavior as well as basic skills like singing and finger-painting; and in *Captain Kangaroo* (1955-1984), Bob Keeshan focused on exemplifying for children traits such as gentleness and love of learning. *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968-2001) aspired to present a friendly, parental approach to teaching. However, *Sesame Street* was the first children's television show to reflect a specific educational curriculum that was designed in collaboration with the show's producers and education professionals to teach children basic academic skills (such as letters and numbers), as well as respect for the self and for others (the latter being a theme that was emphasized in some other shows as well). Unlike other children's programs that predominantly featured white suburban or rural families, the environment of *Sesame Street* was urban and racially inclusive by design, intending to cater to all children, but to be especially aware of including inner-city African-Americans. This demographic later expanded to include a greater acceptance and education

about Hispanic individuals, as well as attempting to focus more on empowering women. Funded by the U.S. government and originally envisioned as a television component of the Head Start program, *Sesame Street* was an experimental part of government work on education and healing the racial divide in America.

In the years since its inception, *Sesame Street* has had many competitors for viewers, both in public and commercial television programming. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, the time period that this study will examine most closely, there were not only other educational programs (such as *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, *Reading Rainbow*, and *3-2-1 Contact*), but also many commercial television shows that had no specific educational content, such as *He-Man*, *She-Ra*, *Rainbow Brite*, *Care Bears*, *Power Rangers*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Notable differences between *Sesame Street* and these shows include a format that used many different mini-stories throughout the show (a tactic that *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* also used to a lesser degree), a specific plan to strengthen multiple areas of academic interest among children, and nearly-constant use of music, including the inclusion of a variety of musical skits and guest artist performances.

Although music was not an original part of *Sesame Street*'s particular educational agenda, musical segments were often used to teach fundamental academic and social skills. During its time on the air, *Sesame Street* has featured a diverse group of famous musical artists: prominent representatives of minority groups, such as Tito Puente and Lena Horne; persons with disabilities, including Itzhak Perlman; and iconic international groups, such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The show also featured songs with animated or puppet characters that were used to teach a variety of educational concepts, including letters, numbers, prepositions, geography, and personal skills, such as brushing teeth. Finally, many other segments were underscored with a songs, leading to a thorough saturation of the program with music. Along with some spoken skits, this music seems to be one of the most beloved and best-remembered parts of the program.

Survey of Literature

The principal sources I have examined are primary sources of or about the show, starting with the music and television segments themselves, which are available both on DVD and online on YouTube.³ Watching these re-released segments allowed me to form a general impression about how music was used in the program during the target decade, and evaluate by popularity which segments the focus group members were most likely to remember. Additional primary source information that I have used to construct a working knowledge of the program includes listings of awards, aims, and individual episode information that can be found on the *Sesame Street* website and linked sources.

Secondary source studies that have been written specifically about *Sesame Street* usually either present its history or debate the educational merit of the program. These studies are important for understanding how *Sesame Street* and its music have come to be the way they are. One history of the show is *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* by Michael Davis, one of the few recently-published books that can therefore provide insight into the entire history of *Sesame Street*'s broadcasts. One book that debates the educational merit of the program is Shalom M. Fisch's book *Children's Learning from Educational Television: Sesame Street and Beyond*. This is a thorough treatment of the history and development of *Sesame Street* from the initial planning stages in 1967 through the show's various changes into the 1990s. Other books, such as *Sesame Street Revisited* by Thomas D. Cook, Hilary Appleton, and Ross F. Conner, et al. document specific educational studies that have been performed on children who have watched *Sesame Street* in controlled circumstances. This book examines the first two years of educational studies on the program that were funded by the government. A book compiling all educational studies on the show up to 1991, including both one-time and longitudinal ones, is *"G" is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street* by Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio. These studies present only quantitative data with some interpretation, such as test scores of children both as they watch the show and years afterwards, as adolescents. The conclusions presented in these works are generally positive. However, while each study lists its procedures and what stimuli were used, there is little to no analysis of

³ www.youtube.com is a video-hosting website. I obtained these videos by searches for the various song titles.

how children reacted to specific segments, how they felt about them, and whether or not the individuals recalled or were influenced by specific events within the episodes they viewed. Additionally, there was little or no specific mention of music in these works.

Another relevant study is a Ph.D. dissertation by Lewis Jay Bernstein entitled *Design Attributes of Sesame Street and the Visual Attention of Preschool Children*. Bernstein follows psychological procedures to measure the effects to attention and general recall produced by each set of video clips that he showed to preschool children. He analyzes their reactions in terms of plot, character usage, type of media presented, and other factors; however, he spends little time on music except for noting whether or not music is used in each specific segment, and its overall tempo. Bernstein acknowledges this lack, calling for more studies of the music of *Sesame Street*.

Some works are more critical of *Sesame Street* as a whole, particularly in reference to the advertised educational benefits of the program compared to how well it achieves these goals, especially in comparison to other programs. In Kay S. Hymowitz's book *Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age*, there is a chapter that is quite critical of *Sesame Street*; Hymowitz decries the program as flashy and overrated, and suggests that it manages to teach the basics of reading without fostering a love of learning or of literature. She is specifically critical of the use of music, arguing that it is distracting to children watchers. In her book *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, Jane Healy launches an even more thorough criticism. Although she cites few specific studies, Healy argues from a cognitive perspective that children's brains are overloaded by the quick pace of the show and the many (over)stimulating events that may happen during a single show segment. She also suggests that lack of connections between segments, as well as the lack of connection between learning words and reading them on the physical page of a book or document, may be detrimental to children once they actually begin to read entire sentences.

Only a few scholars have addressed the music of *Sesame Street* directly. For example, in the article "Video Songs from 'Sesame Street': A Comparison of Fifth Graders' and Adults' Opinions Regarding Messages for Preschool Children," Judith A. Jellison and David E. Wolfe showed to these two groups three different musical excerpts from *Sesame Street*. They asked the groups what the most important part of the song was, and whether or not each individual thought that a preschool child would comprehend this point. This study empirically examines the

relationship between child and adult perceptions of these segments, and the perception of what type of information each individual in the audience was meant to perceive. Another representative article, “Children’s Television Viewing: Attention and Comprehension of Auditory Versus Visual Information” by Kathy Pezdek and Eileen F. Hartman, uses *Sesame Street* to examine the aural impact of the program as compared to the visual impact upon the children’s attention. Their findings did not support Healey’s contentions, suggesting instead that audio information can be used in conjunction with visual ideas to reinforce learning ideals. Both of these studies are quantitative and single point-based evaluations of the music, although the Jellison and Wolfe article most closely provides a model for what I wish to explore instead in a more ethnographic sense with music and memory.

To properly evaluate viewers’ perceptions of *Sesame Street*, awareness of general cultural trends, specifically as they concern children’s television, is crucial. For this reason, one important type of literature that I have drawn on concerns the history of television in general, and public television and children’s television more specifically. For example, historical context for the development of *Sesame Street* can be found in books such as *Kids’ TV: The First 25 Years* by Stuart Fischer, *The Window in the Corner: A Half-Century of Children’s Television* by Ruth Inglis, and Marsha Kinder’s book *Kids’ Media Culture*. These works showcase overall trends in children’s television programming, and can shed light on how *Sesame Street* might represent changes in this programming. They only touch on *Sesame Street* briefly, but do present insight into the theoretical arguments and perspectives that may be important to consider while dealing with music in the context of television.

In order to study music in children’s culture, I had to also be aware of the various types of studies that were previously conducted in this area. In ethnomusicology, there have still been surprisingly few studies of children’s musical culture—John Blacking was one of the first ethnomusicologists to broach the subject, with his extensive studies of children’s song repertoires and their functions among the Venda people of South Africa, continuing with the trend of anthropologists to mostly catalogue children’s songs and song-games. In one of his books, *Venda Children’s Songs*, he describes the musical habits of the children of the Venda people of southern Africa, in which he confirms this idea of a disconnect between childhood and adulthood. Later ethnomusicological studies have often continued with this theme, such as

Gerhard Kubik's article "Musical Activities of Children Within the Eastern Angolan Culture Area." and Katheryn Marsh's article "Children's Singing Games: Composition on the Playground?" Others researchers have extended their research to include the cognitive and linguistic aspects of music making among children—a good selection of these studies can be found in *The Biology of Music Making: Music and Child Development*, edited by Frank R. Wilson and Franz L. Roehmann. In the last few years, there has been resurgence in interest in children's music, with some new experimental twists, particularly focusing on the cognitive value of active music-making within a societal context. However, little attention has been paid to the study of children's consumption of music that adults create for them, particularly in a Western, popular-culture setting—of which the instructional songs of *Sesame Street* are surely a prime example. Even less attention has been paid to how knowledge of these songs is used and understood in adulthood. One exception to this is the aforementioned book *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, by Kyra Gaunt, in which she traces the use of double-dutch and clapping games (which sometimes include references to "adult" culture) from the playground into adult, male rap songs and adult female culture. However, the music of *Sesame Street* still presents a different type of case; it was music composed by adults, used by children, and then often reincorporated into the adult psyche, albeit often in a latent kind of way.

Because my methodology is unconventional for ethnomusicology in drawing upon focus group techniques used in other disciplines (see Methodology section below), recourse to focus group methodology publications has been essential. My adaptation of a focus group method is derived from several social science works on focus groups and other types of qualitative group interviews, primarily the book *Guidelines for Studies Using the Group Interview Technique*, which was published by the International Labour Organization in 1994. Although the group discussion portion of this project was formatted more like a classroom seminar than a focus group *per se*, this publication provided basic information on how to conduct manageable group interviews that reflect regular conversations in such an "created" cultural context.

I also draw upon works that address different aspects of music and memory, including how music and memory are used to create community, how music is made memorable, and how technology has allowed music to become re-contextualized and remembered in different cultural

contexts. Kay Kaufman Shelemay's book *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews* is one example of a study concerning how music (the *pizmon* tradition of Syrian Jews) is used to encode personal and cultural meaning through song texts, melodies and performance contexts, in this case maintaining a transnational community that might have disappeared otherwise. Although individuals in Shelemay's study sometimes learn songs from the media, regular live performance among communities is crucial to the existence and cultural importance of these songs. Another ethnography that provides an interesting perspective on transmission of songs is the book *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* by Kyra D. Gaunt. In the last chapter, she discusses her experiences with adult women who have revived and re-analyzed their childhood interest in double-dutch, which is similar to what I asked subjects to do with *Sesame Street*. Though *Sesame Street* is not part of an oral tradition, information about the oral tradition is a good point of reference for understanding cultural memory, both as a contrasting method of transmitting musical memory and as a way to understand how songs can be "catchy" enough to remain in an individual's memory for years after their last hearing of the song. The book *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epics, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* by David C. Rubin provides a cognitive and literary analysis of these types of orally-transmitted popular culture. Some of the book is too quantitatively-based to aid my specific goals; however, both the analysis of verse structure and the exploration of relationships between the visual, the aural, and factors external to performance itself may be useful in determining how and why various performances on *Sesame Street* affected my subjects. More specifically, Jan Vansina's book *Oral Traditions as History*, provided me with a way to conceptualize how reflection and new experience can become incorporated into memory and then considered "historical."

I have also looked at different theoretical models for studying non-traditional types of musical cultures. One work that is important for this is Arjun Appadurai's article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in which he posits five types of "scapes," which are ways of thinking about the transmission and linkage of culture in globalized world, or creating a "social imaginary" that is not defined by specific geographic areas; I am particularly interested in how *Sesame Street* functions as part of an American mediascape and ethnoscape. Related to this idea of the social imaginary, I have also examined the essays "Shared

Imaginations: Celtic and Corsican Encounters in the Soundscape of the Soul” by Caroline Bithell and “Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past” by Philip Bohlman, both of which address musical cultures that do not function “in the present” as such; Bithell’s article explores the creation of heritage by using long-past musical cultures, and Bohlman’s article addresses the recreation of a musical culture that no longer exists. These were useful in conceptualizing my study, because the musical culture of *Sesame Street* is, in a way, a type of historical culture, only captured and re-created in memory, and there are some of the same difficulties in handling music created in a past culture and recreating memory of past cultural experiences. Finally, I draw from the methodology and approach to children’s culture presented in the Michael B. Bakan et. al. article “Following Frank: Response-Ability and the Co-Creation of Culture in a Medical Ethnomusicology Program for Children on the Autism Spectrum.” In this study, the researchers drew together groups of individuals consisting of children with autism spectrum diagnoses, their parents, and two members of the research team who served as music-play facilitators to form a communal, constructive music-play environment. This study, which involves the researchers’ “construction” of a “cultural community” comprising individuals who did not formerly share communal bonds but who are in a sense linked (according to the criteria of the research project) by shared life experience (in this case, living with autism), serves as a model within ethnomusicology for my work on *Sesame Street*.

Theoretical Approach

The idea central to my theoretical approach is that in this age of mass-mediated information, 'a culture' is no longer limited to a single place, time, or event. Although cultures have always been multi-local and affected by the interactions of past generations’ materials, recording and transmission technology have made a sort of digital archive of much of the world’s cultural information available at the click of a button. This has allowed for the creation of entire cultures in which individuals engage with each other without ever meeting. Indeed, effects similar to those created by such traditional cultural ties can be observed in individuals who do not identify themselves as members of a single culture. In *Sesame Street*, certain musical segments were broadcast over vast expanses of geography and time, influencing and educating

countless children. Although many individuals who watched the show as children may not currently identify themselves as being an active part of “*Sesame Street* culture,” their childhood memories of the songs can serve to link them to other individuals who experienced the same segments in childhood, and indeed, when these individuals met and began discussing *Sesame Street*, this common influence, once latent, illuminated and produced a new type of culture in the context of remembrance.

Thus, the overarching objective of this thesis is to examine the relationship of personal and social memory in the context of musical popular culture; that is, to observe first of all how individuals have processed and used song-memories from childhood to form their current identities, and then to analyze how these memories of individuals—revisited in a focus group context—serve as a foundation to create a culturally-cohesive group, if only in a limited sense, among individuals who were previously strangers. Although the music of *Sesame Street* is not by any means the only music with which this could be observed, it is an ideal subject since the music is common to a large group of individuals raised in different areas across the United States and around the world. Additionally, it has been central to cultural experiences of these subjects during their childhoods, a time when individual personalities and worldviews are principally shaped. Finally, although there could be said to be different “eras” of *Sesame Street* programming, it is still a large part of popular culture today, both for children and adults, so this study could potentially serve as a springboard for others to focus on younger or older generations of viewers.

While there have been studies of *Sesame Street* and its music, these studies (as described above) are primarily quantitative in nature; their aims are to explore the music of *Sesame Street* in how it pertains to accomplishing educational goals, discuss how much of the programming is occupied by music, etc. They are heavily influenced by the fields of music education and psychology, and thus provide information that can be explained by numbers and percentages. My goal instead is to explore and discuss the music of *Sesame Street* ethnographically, as a facet of “music in/as culture” (Merriam 1964 and Merriam 1977), both reflecting broader trends in society and as a cultural artifact and maker of cultural experience in its own right.

My interest is then to combine theoretical perspectives of how music is used to embody cultural memory (as suggested by Shelemay and others), mediated by television and captured in memory, can become a force to unite individuals across space and time.

Method

The first step necessary for this project was background research into the areas of children's television, focusing on the evolution of programs between the 1950s the 1980s and specifically shows that were targeted to *Sesame Street*'s age group (about 3-7) and on the air during my frame of reference, the 1980s and early 1990s. This investigation included not only current and contemporary assessments of the program, but also social commentary on television in general during those time periods. The heart of this background research focused on the substantial literature on *Sesame Street*, including magazine and newspaper articles, psychological studies, and books that explore the development of the show. This also necessitated viewing musical segments from the shows and reading about when and how often certain segments were broadcast, in order to refresh my own memory about the breadth and depth of musical segments broadcast within the specified time range. Narrowing these down to segments that were either shown frequently over the duration of *Sesame Street*'s run, or those that premiered and ran at least throughout the 1980s, I prepared a folder on my computer of song videos that would be used in an interactive manner to start discussion:

- African Alphabet (Ladysmith Black Mambazo)
- "Bein' Green"
- "C is for Cookie"
- "I Love Trash"
- "Mahna Mahna"
- "One of These Things"
- "People in Your Neighborhood"
- "Pinball Number Count"
- "Put Down the Duckie"
- "Ran Kan Kan," featuring Tito Puente with Oscar the Grouch

I began with these songs as examples for my two focus groups and then expanded the discussion to songs requested by the participant members, as detailed below.

In this study, I chose to use an adapted focus group methodology as my primary method for several reasons. The main reason is that the focus group can most closely imitate a real television-watching environment: in a room with refreshments and a group of peers, the participants in this study were able to interact in a manner that was similar to how they normally would while watching television. This encouraged individuals, most of whom were strangers, to freely comment upon and discuss these segments as they saw and heard them. In addition, hearing the stories of others helped to remind individuals in the group of important information from their own *Sesame Street* experiences. Finally, in attempting to discuss a musical culture that spans multiple geographic and temporal locations, creating a gathering of this type is one way to bring together a sample of such necessarily disparate individuals.

The focus groups were comprised of Florida State University students of the youngest adult cohort (aged 18-30 years) who had watched *Sesame Street* as children. I had originally intended to run two focus groups of ten to fifteen individuals each—however, due to the somewhat flexible standards of commitment amongst the student population, the result was one focus group of five individuals and one of fifteen individuals. Although this variation in size was not ideal, the qualitative nature of this project, coupled with similar levels of participation among members of both groups, made this difference matter little to the nature of the conversation. The two sessions were held on Tuesday, September 23, and Monday, September 30, 2008, from five to seven pm. The groups met in a centrally-located classroom at Florida State University, which was convenient to the participants and still provided a comfortable environment with the correct technology to show these video excerpts.

The format of these sessions was generally as follows. When the participants arrived, I ensured that they understood the purpose and approach of the study and the fact that it would be videotaped for later analysis. They were asked to sign consent forms while the others arrived. When everyone was present, the sessions commenced informally with each individual introducing themselves with name, major, and their favorite part of *Sesame Street*. I was a participant insofar as I helped guide the discussion in a capacity similar to a seminar leader and showed the video and song clips. After introductions, I began showing the video clips, encouraging the participants to react or comment as normal (not feel that they had to remain silent during each segment), as well as to suggest other songs that the group would enjoy. After

each segment, the group discussed what they had noticed about each segment, if they had seen it before, if it brought back any memories or reminded them of other things they had seen, etc. Towards the end of each session, I fostered open discussion about what the participants had seen, completing each session after about two hours. Due to the fact that the room could only be reserved for a two-hour period, we had to vacate the space at the end of the allotted time. However, even though we could no longer watch the videos after this two-hour session, discussions lasted long afterwards—over an hour in the case of the first group. Comprehensive, post-session reviews of the videotapes and of my notes were used to identify the central themes upon which my discussion of the data collected in this study is based.

Contents and Chapter Structure of the Thesis

There are three chapters in the thesis following this opening, introductory chapter. The second chapter, “Sing a Song: ABCs, 1-2-3s, and a Primary Musical Education,” first discusses the specific types of songs found on *Sesame Street* in terms of what the songs seem to be meant to teach academically, and the types of musical influences they contain. These different songs are then be contextualized in terms of individual stories and reactions to the segments.

The third chapter, “The Count is Jewish?” A Discourse on Diversity” addresses a recurring thread of discussion throughout the two sessions—how race and ethnicity were presented in the songs of *Sesame Street* and how this informed the individuals’ watching of the show, both as children and as adults. Central themes in this chapter, explored through several case studies, are conceptions of the appropriateness and difficulty of being politically correct as seen both from the remembered standpoint of childhood and current impressions of growing up in a cultural society that aimed for political correctness. This section also addresses the difficulties of attempting to assess one’s past through one’s present circumstances.

The final chapter, “Shared Pasts, Shared Presents: How Memories of *Sesame Street* Build Community,” elaborates more on the idea of memory and the formation of identity, focusing on where and how the subjects of this study encounter and experience *Sesame Street* in their adult lives, and how they interacted in mixed groups using the music from this television show as the central point of discussion. The chapter also weaves together the individual debates presented in

chapters two and three to explore the nature of *Sesame Street* as a mass-mediated musical object, and how the re-viewing of this shared culture has allowed for individuals to draw their own conclusions about how this music played an active role in their childhoods and beyond. Finally, by capturing these narratives in the context of *Sesame Street*, I hope to show that music in media such as television has changed notions of a temporal-spatial community that is based on personal ties to a more fluid recognition of “self” and “other” as constructed by current reactions to past cultural experiences.

CHAPTER II

SING A SONG: ABCs, 1-2-3s, AND A PRIMARY MUSICAL EDUCATION

Music is a ubiquitous feature of virtually all *Sesame Street* episode segments. Although the best-known and most distinctly remembered musical aspects of the show are segments that are “songs,” almost every skit has some kind of underscoring or accompanying song, from the video segments showing the lifestyles of baby animals to Bert and Ernie’s adventures as Egyptologists. This “incidental” music contributes greatly to the show’s atmosphere and overall aesthetic; however, perhaps more overtly important to the construction of a multilocal *Sesame Street* community are the specific musical segments that consist of a single song and its accompanying action.

In the original plans for the *Sesame Street* curriculum from the late 1960s,⁴ music was not given its own specific category *per se*; instead, musical segments were lumped together with other “filler” materials, meant to provide a break from the more explicitly educational skits. However, it is clear that the educational and the musical could never be seen as purely discrete entities, as music became a central part to “educational” segments and the subjects of the songs increasingly revolved around types of academic categories that were considered crucial for children’s development and were prioritized in the representation of the show. Since the creators of *Sesame Street* differentiated between types of academic and social goals as target areas for teaching children, it seems logical to introduce and discuss the variety of types of songs on *Sesame Street* by explicit educational goals.⁵ The particular educational goals most reflected in the songs can be categorized into songs meant to teach numbers and counting, songs to teach letters and the alphabet, and songs meant to teach good personal and social habits. In this

⁴ See Morrow 2005.

⁵ Of course, there are songs that do not specifically fit into one of these categories and some that that could be seen to reinforce multiple ideas simultaneously; these I will either place in a single category and return to in multiple discussions, or will address separately. Generally, the songs that individuals brought up in discussion trended strongly towards those that would easily fit into one of these educational categories; whether this is because they were shown more often or simply made a greater impression on these individuals is impossible to tell.

chapter, I will provide overviews of the main categories of songs, including illustrative examples, followed by sections in which I document and interpret responses to and perspectives on these songs offered by participants in the research study during the focus group sessions.

Number and Counting Songs

Songs that deal with numbers and counting are found often in *Sesame Street*. These songs tend to either focus on one specific number (repeating the number in the song lyrics while giving visual examples of that number), or involve counting from one to some higher number, most often no higher than twelve. The first type of song—that focusing on a single number—only came up once in the focus group meetings, and therefore seems to be the most logical example. This song, “Martian Beauty,” was requested by one of the focus group participants. The song begins with a male voice counting from one to nine, with the corresponding numbers flashing on the screen. Then, accompanying the narrative of the song, a disembodied pencil begins to sketch on the screen, drawing a “Martian,” who, according to the song, has everything in sets of nines—“nine hairs on her head.../tied in bows of red,” etc. The pencil draws everything simultaneously with its mention in the song, thus reinforcing the number both with visual and audio repetition.

Another similar example is the song “The Alligator King,” an animated story-song in which the alligator king tells his seven sons that whoever can cheer him up will inherit his crown. Throughout the song, each son attempts to cheer his father by bringing him a set of seven presents—for example, rubies, diamond rings, or bottles of perfume. Each time the word “seven” appears in the song, seven of each mentioned object appear on the screen, once again reinforcing a specific number both visually and aurally.

Songs that teach counting, rather than focusing on the teaching of a single number, are much more common. One famous early example is “Pinball Number Count,” a piece that features the Pointer Sisters⁶ performing the numbers from one through twelve, accompanied by a psychedelic animation sequence of a ball travelling through a pinball machine. When the Pointer Sisters sing the numbers in the same phrase, they flash on the screen, either as the primary visual

⁶ An American R&B group, most popular in the 1970s.

content on the screen or as lit-up numbers on a clock. At other points in the song, they sing the name of a single number, and that number is displayed on one of the objects within the pinball machine. First released in 1976, this clip has been shown repeatedly throughout the history of *Sesame Street*, and is possibly one of the most popular stand-alone examples of a counting song.

For comparison, one can look to the animated segment “Ladybug Picnic,” another song that focused on counting to twelve which detailed the adventures of a set of twelve ladybugs at a picnic. Each chorus begins with the vocalist singing the numbers from one to twelve, with another ladybug appearing on-screen every time he sang a new number. In this way, like in the pinball and Martian segments, the introduction of the numbers has a direct visual corollary, either by displaying the value of each number with tangible objects or by showing the numeral for each number

The Muppet character the Count—a purple fellow whose looks best resemble a parody of a Transylvanian vampire—is arguably the *Sesame Street* character most closely identify with counting. Although the Count was also featured in non-musical segments, two of the most well-remembered segments featuring the Count involve him singing songs. The first, “The Song of the Count,” originally aired in the 1972-1973 season, is a melancholy klezmer tune about how much the Count loves to count. The only mention of counting specific objects is contained in the phrase “when I’m alone I count myself;” the only counting that actually occurs is the Count counting from one through four along with the beat of the music. In contrast to this is another song featuring the Count, “The Batty Bat.” In this segment, the Count demonstrates one of his childhood dances, “The Batty Bat,” an upbeat waltz in which he counts “one-two-three” with each beat of the song’s meter in between calling out the dance moves. While he is singing, the Count dances around his castle, and the camera sometimes pans away to bat puppets that squeak and flap their wings in time to the waltz beat of the song. As in the other Count song, while he does present the counting of numbers, the focus is less on the numbers themselves and more on the encouragement of counting.

These songs represent a variety of approaches to the idea of counting: portraying numbers as numerals, as objects, as beats of a song, and as a general idea in displaying all of the things it is possible to count. The songs also make use of a variety of genres of music, from the country twang of “Ladybug Picnic” to the klezmer sounds of the Count, to the R&B blend of the

Pointer Sisters. Finally, since these songs are both accompanied by animation or the somewhat live-action universe of the Muppets, they present a visual variety of information for children. The consequence of this overall diversity in the types of counting songs is an interesting kind of varied repetition found throughout *Sesame Street*, the idea being that children need repetition to learn, but that utilizing varied formats and independently addressing different aspects of the numbers, alone and in a counting sequence, will reinforce the idea at hand.

Letter and Alphabet Songs

Similar in character and style to the number and counting songs are those dealing with the letters of the alphabet and the alphabet as a whole. Overall, they seem to represent about the same percentage within the *Sesame Street* musical oeuvre as the counting songs.

The song that I used to begin each viewing session in order to bring the participants into a “*Sesame Street* mindset” was the song “C is for Cookie,” which, nearly unique to the set of songs featured in these sessions, was one that every participant in the study both recognized and remembered. The song features Cookie Monster, a fuzzy, blue Muppet who will devour anything in his path—he is shown in the series as eating letters and numbers—but who prefers cookies above all else. The original version of this song was first aired in 1972, and only slightly edited in lyrical and visual content in later versions. In the song, Cookie Monster is perched in a giant yellow ‘C,’ and gestures along to his song with a large chocolate chip cookie. He introduces the song with this set of reflections: “What starts with the letter ‘C’? ‘Cookie’ starts with ‘C’! Let’s think of other things that start with ‘C’! Uh...who cares about the other things!” He then launches into the chorus:

‘C’ is for cookie, that’s good enough for me (x 3)
Oh! Cookie, cookie, cookie starts with ‘C.’

In the bridge section, Cookie Monster discusses objects that look like a ‘C.’ He points out that a cookie with a bite taken from it looks like a ‘C,’ as does a round doughnut with a bite out of it—however, he discards the doughnut idea because the doughnut is “not as good as a cookie.” The moon, he points out, also looks like a ‘C’—however, since the moon is inedible, he determines that a cookie is the best representative to him of the letter ‘C.’

In this song, the shape of the letter ‘C’ is clearly represented, both by the large ‘C’ on the screen and by the various objects that Cookie Monster discusses as looking like the ‘C.’ In this particular clip, the ‘C’-sound is not particularly reinforced, although clearly the letter is represented by a cookie not only due to the particular dining proclivities of Cookie Monster, but also because, as the chorus states, “Cookie starts with ‘C.’” This suggests that each segment was not designed to promote the entire range of possibilities of usages of each clip, but that each featured one educational focus and several auxiliary ideas.

Another letter-learning song that several individuals requested was “Letter B.” A parody of the Beatles song “Let It Be,” the song “Letter B” features a band consisting of Muppet beetles, playing a concert with staging exactly mimicking mid-1960s Beatles performances. The tune they sing is just slightly different in melody and chord progression from the Beatles song. To this adapted melody, the beetles explore different aspects of the letter ‘B.’ They discuss the fact that the letter “comes after ‘A’ and before ‘C’,” as well as identifying the sound that the letter makes—“the buh-buh-buh of letter ‘B.’” Here, while focusing on a single letter like in “C is for Cookie,” in “Letter B,” the central emphasis of the song is on where the letter falls within the alphabet, and learning the specific sound that the letter makes. The song also includes a list of words that begin with ‘B’, such as “big,” “bird,” “ball,” and “bubble,” which provides a general context for how ‘B’ is used in a broader context.

Songs featuring the alphabet have a somewhat different format, as the primary focus of these is to teach the letters of the alphabet in the correct order. One interesting song that came to light was “Roosevelt Franklin Sings the Alphabet.” This song from the 1970s was one that was not specifically familiar to most of the participants who watched it, but several individuals had inquired about clips featuring Roosevelt Franklin, either from remembering that this particular character sang, or from reading about him at later points in their lives. Roosevelt Franklin was an early human-type Muppet who was specifically meant to represent an African-American child, both in phenotype and in mannerisms. He was controversial because of how he portrayed African-Americans, and ceased to be an active character in 1975, although segments that included him must have been re-run into the 1980s. This song, however, demonstrates one of the common ways *Sesame Street* represents the alphabet—by singing it straight through, with no particular elaborations on the specific letters. Prompted by his mother to sing the alphabet before

he can go out and play, Roosevelt sings each letter after being spurred on by his mother to tell her which letter follows the one he has just sung. In this way, the alphabet is almost simply recited in song form.

An interesting contrast to “Roosevelt Franklin Sings the Alphabet” is another alphabet song from the late 1980s, “African Alphabet.” This song features Kermit the Frog—a well-known Muppet that was also featured in Jim Henson’s adult project, *The Muppet Show*—and an anonymous cast of “African” Muppets. The Muppets, voiced in the *isicathamiya*-style⁷ by the South African vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, recite the alphabet as each letter appears on the screen. The second time through the alphabet, Kermit sings a word corresponding to each letter in such a way as to form a description about an African landscape. In addition to the notable difference in representation and politics,⁸ these songs also show a difference in approach to the alphabet itself. While Roosevelt Franklin’s version features each letter individually but does not elaborate upon the uses of the letter in words, “African Alphabet” treats the letters themselves at first as simply a series, but then elaborates on the letters by showcasing individual words that begin with each letter.

Like the songs featuring numbers and counting, the letter and alphabet songs use a variety of genres of music and types of visual or narrative action to display multiple facets of how the letters can be recognized: their sounds, their places in the alphabet, and words featuring each letter. This similarity is unsurprising, considering that letters and numbers are considered to be primary to all other academic learning; however, from the adult perspective of analysis, it would seem that the creativity and diversity of methods with which this material is represented would appeal to the wide range of learning styles and interests of the child audience, as well as perhaps even entertain parents.

⁷ *Isicathamiya*, a black South African style of popular music derived from adaptations of Zulu traditional music by male migrant workers in the cities, was popularized internationally by Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The genre and specifically Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s interpretation thereof became a musical symbol of protest against the apartheid system. See Muller 2008 and Erlman 1996.

⁸ See discussion in Chapter III.

Study Participant Perspectives: Learning from Letters and Numbers Songs

There are a variety of quantitative studies demonstrating that children who watched *Sesame Street* performed at a higher level than their peers in classroom settings in their early elementary school years, as well as having improved test results all the way through middle and high school (Cook, Appleton, and Conner, et. al. 1976, Bogatz and Ball 1971, Fisch and Truglio, eds., 2001). These facts and figures are based on viewing the show as a whole; the specific impact of the music itself in this case is questionable, since in reality, there are probably few children who watched *Sesame Street* regularly who only ever experienced the songs.

While all of these songs were built around teaching a specific concept to children, it is clear that if the participants in the focus groups of this study did learn their letters and numbers from *Sesame Street*, this was not a central part of what they remembered and enjoyed about these songs. Even for those participants who remembered learning specific skills from *Sesame Street*—for example, one person remembered they had learned the continents from a song and one learned how to swim from watching a video with children and animals swimming—very few of the participants suggested that they remembered learning the numbers or letters from the songs or the show as a whole. This could be explained by the fact that because letters and numbers are so fundamental to all subsequent academic learning and are the focus of so much repetition at a young age, an individual’s knowledge of these could not easily be ascribed to a single source. However, one woman in the study, who provided the most thorough description of learning these fundamentals from *Sesame Street*, especially the songs, explained it in the following way:

It sticks in your head, and if it’s a song you sing all the time, like the song with the letter ‘B,’ then you’re learning about letter ‘B,’ like “Buh buh buh”...I mean, it’s good because I liked the music already, but then I would go to school and already, I see the letter ‘C’ and I remember it from Sesame Street, and it’s already in my head from when I sang along...it taught me my letters and stuff from before I went to school.⁹

⁹Due to the nature of my study, I will not be citing direct quotations by specific individual or date; the quotations were drawn from a variety of participants from both the September 23rd and September 30th sessions.

At least in this one case, this educational content was viewed as being important to someone's past success at the beginning of school. This example also demonstrates what this individual thought was memorable about the songs—the catchy tunes, the repetitions, the sounding out of the letters. However, she continues, “I mean, but I don’t think that’s the main impact of *Sesame Street*, but definitely I think that’s good.” This reflects an overall attitude that seemed prevalent among the members of the focus groups: although several other individuals mentioned the educational content of these songs as important, they were much more vocal about how portrayals of the characters in the songs reflected societal values.

The initial reaction to remembered songs was typically one of delight—in most cases, when individuals remembered songs, they would shout “Yes!” or “That was one of my favorites!” and then those for whom the song was a favorite would recall some particular aspect of the song, usually involving both lyrics and visuals. For example, the participant who specifically requested that we watch “Martian Beauty” introduced the song by saying, “I remember ‘Martian Beauty’ ... that was one I watched in like, 1992. She has nine individual hairs, and a bow on every one. I remember that! That was one of my favorites.” In this case, she not only recalled the song fondly, but also remembered (before seeing it again) both visual and lyrical cues from the song, describing it in a way that mirrored the lyrical structure. Then, when the videos began, many of the viewers become thoroughly engaged with the songs—sometimes dancing in their seats, singing along to themselves, and laughing at the visual and musical jokes spread throughout many of the songs. In one session, for the song “‘C’ is for Cookie,” everyone began to pick up cookies they were eating and waved them around to the song like cigarette lighters or cell phones at a rock concert.

After each song ended, the participants would reflect on what they had seen. Sometimes there would only be a few comments about a particular video clip, and sometimes the clip would spark entire discussions. Of the counting and alphabet clips, a surprising number of comments focused not on how the alphabet or numbers were portrayed—after all, letters and numbers are not intrinsically controversial. Instead, the focus for the song “‘C’ is for Cookie” was on the portrayal of healthy versus unhealthy eating, while discussions about the Count and Roosevelt Franklin focused more on the portrayal of racial difference by focusing on portrayal of African-American and Jewish communities in both visual and aural ways. “‘C’ is for Cookie” will be

discussed more in the next section, while the representation of racial difference will be the subject of Chapter Three.

Songs About Building Self and Building Community

Perhaps because the numbers and alphabet present a limited amount of data to teach, there are many more songs in *Sesame Street* that are related to teaching children some sort of life skill. These skills were also specifically a part of the original *Sesame Street* curriculum to promote hygiene and good health among the poorer sectors of society. The range of the “messages” included in these songs is also extremely broad, but focus on two main areas: the child learning good self-care habits, and learning how to maintain healthy self-esteem while interacting properly with other individuals.

This first set of songs, dealing with physical self-care, is more straightforward; the ones that the groups viewed either discussed the value of healthy eating or of staying clean. The first of these songs, “Captain Vegetable,” is a catchy tune that advocates for the eating of vegetables. The song opens with the appearance of a Muppet rabbit in a cape, clutching a carrot in one hand and a bunch of celery in the other. He begins with the chorus of the song:

It is I, Captain Vegetable
With my carrot and my celery
Eating crunchy vegetables is good for me
And it’s good for you
So eat them too
For teeth so strong
Your whole life long
Eat celery and carrots by the bunch!
Three cheers for me, Captain Vegetable! Crunch, crunch, crunch!

After that there are two scenes, each of which involves a Muppet boy sitting down to a plate of “unhealthy” food—one child eats candy while the other eats spaghetti. After each boy sings a verse discussing how much he likes that kind of food, Captain Vegetable reappears and repeats his chorus, apparently by the end turning the unhealthy eaters into converts to the cause of crunchy vegetables.

Another song that advocates healthy eating is “Cereal Girl,” a parody of Madonna’s “Material Girl.” In this sequence which imitates a 1980s-era music video, a monster girl is persuaded by her dad to try eating cereal, and is converted to this healthy breakfast choice. The video does not particularly go into the health benefits of cereal, instead listing several ways of eating cereal. In this respect, “Captain Vegetable” is much more detailed, since it not only advocates trying these healthy foods, but the lyrics of the song blatantly note that “it’s good for you,” and encourages development of strong teeth. Both of these songs also tie into broader trends in popular culture when they were shown in the late 1980s and early 1990s—Madonna was at the peak of her popularity and might be familiar from the musical choices of parents or older siblings, and superheroes have been continuously a part of popular American children’s culture.

Other *Sesame Street* songs work on building different types of personal care habits. One of the songs that was most popular amongst the individuals in the focus groups was the song “Do De Rubber Duck,” a reggae song in which Ernie takes a bath. He begins in the bathtub alone, singing about taking a bath with his rubber duckie, when several of the most popular Muppets—the Count, Oscar the Grouch, and Kermit the Frog, along with many, many others—appear outside the bathroom and then in his bathtub, which expands to include them, and begin to sing along. The song has a comic effect as at every line of every verse, a new Muppet appears singing from the tub. By the last chorus, the bathtub has about seven additional Muppets in it, and they are dancing around in a circle, when Bert knocks on the door. Astonished to hear the singing, he presses his ear against the door. At the end of the song, everyone but Ernie disappears, and he asks “Where did everyone go?” while squeaking the rubber duckie. Throughout the song, the different characters describe benefits of taking a bath (“You can wash those germs away!”) as well as different activities to do in the bath, such as playing with a rubber duck or counting the bubbles. This and the similar song featuring Ernie, “Rubber Duckie,” suggest that the bath can be both healthy and fun.

Another set of songs describe less tangible ways of well-being, teaching the child to value themselves and others. These songs often take very different approaches from each other, even in discussing similar ideas. For example, one of these songs was “There’s Only One Me,” in which a doodled cartoon girl sings that “There is only one me/Who can do what I do/There is

only one me/It's the same way for you.” In the rest of the song, she sings about all of the things that she can do. This song is meant to show individuality, to teach children to value the fact that they are unique. Other songs expand this concept to include relationships with others. For example, in the song “Bein’ Green,” Kermit the Frog sings a melancholy tune with more subtle lyrics, reflecting on the color of his skin (green), and how sometimes it would be wonderful to be something else—another color that is “more colorful,” something that stands out. However, Kermit concludes that there are many good things about being green—at the end, he states that,

I am green and it'll do fine, it's beautiful
And I think it's what I want to be.

Analyzing these lyrics as such reveals this to be another song that revolves around building self-esteem—this time, specifically in the face of those who appear to be more advantaged. Reading into the use of Kermit's color, one can also draw parallels between this song and racial tensions in that Kermit chooses to be content with the color of his skin, even if it is not representative of the predominant or “desired” skin color. The song additionally provides a forum for discussing race in a way that is not directly tied to real-world tensions.

One final example of these types of songs can be found in the animated segment “It's Hip to Be a Square.” This parody of the hit song “It's Hip to Be Square,” by Huey Lewis and the News, takes a much different stance than the original—while the popular radio hit from 1986 is about the inevitability and indeed desirability of conformity, the *Sesame Street* song “It's Hip to Be a Square” celebrates the idea of individuality within diversity. The song is produced like a music video, with a square as the lead singer. He reflects that while all of his band are squares, he also gladly plays with the other shapes—triangles, rectangles, and circles. In this way, the song appears to celebrate both unity and belonging to a group (being a square), while still enjoying participation in a broader type of society—for example, being one of many different types of shapes. These songs therefore represent variations on the same kind of theme—moral messages about respecting the self and others, embedded in a catchy tune and clever lyrics.

Study Participant Perspectives: Healthy Eaters with High Self-Esteem?

On the whole, the songs discussed in the preceding section present to the adult eye what appear to be frank lessons about living and interacting with others; they are just as explicit in their own way as the songs about numbers and letters described earlier. As current young adults, the focus-group individuals were very much aware of the main and possible supplementary messages that one could read into these songs. However, the members of the focus groups were in a unique position to evaluate these messages. While this collection of undergraduate and graduate students are no longer considered children, they are also not considered (or self-considered) to be fully adults in part because they lacked children of their own. Thus, they were able to moderate their recognition of these values portrayed in the songs with their memories of them from childhood, and how these developed throughout their lifetimes without the bias of currently experiencing childhood, either through themselves or their children.

The “‘C’ is for Cookie” clip received a great deal of attention in both focus groups, especially in juxtaposition to the eating habits portrayed in “Captain Vegetable.” Some part of this was surely sparked by the announcement in 2005 that Cookie Monster would no longer be solely devouring cookies, but instead would also be promoting fruits and vegetables, relegating cookies to “a sometimes food.” (“Cookie Monster Curbs Cookie Habit,” *BBC News*, 11 April 2005; Carter 2005) The discussion about this change and the impact of the original song were heated, especially in juxtaposition to “Captain Vegetable.” In the first session, the conversation about the Cookie Monster was as follows:

A: Yeah, he [Cookie Monster] is a classic. He’s one that you hear lots of urban legends about, like, he can’t sing about cookies anymore, because they’re full of sugar and bad for babies.

M: I heard about that. I saw like an episode where—

L: Is that true?

M: He, I mean, they were trying to be more health-conscious, so there was this episode where I saw—

J: Cookies are a sometimes-food.

L: “V is for vegetable!”

M: He starts doing that, and then, all of a sudden, he's just like, I want to go back to cookies.¹⁰

The initial reactions in the second group were similar:

J: I have a definite thought on this. This would never fly on today's *Sesame Street*, because I think I've heard that Cookie Monster now eats vegetables, and it's funny to me that people think that Cookie Monster is so influential that he's teaching you to eat bad by nomming on cookies and doughnuts and had to be changed to eating vegetables to promote healthy eating habits amongst kids.

A: Cookies are now called "sometimes foods."

Ju: Like, is there now, celery monster?

A: "Let's see if there's one that has vegetables."

Cookie Monster—and particularly the classic image of him rhapsodizing about cookies—had clearly become a central part of individuals' memories of *Sesame Street*, and the appearance of Cookie Monster with vegetables, which actually takes place in the form of a song, is seen as threatening the "'C' is for Cookie"-era monster. While the focus group members generally acknowledged that healthy eating was an important lesson for children, Cookie Monster and his habit were considered sacred—even though several individuals jokingly described how the habits he portrayed could be seen as negative. One individual described Cookie Monster's behavior as that of a drug addict; another picked up on this idea, and described him as this junkie in a closet, gobbling cookies. Another suggested ironically that, "Maybe *Sesame Street* is the reason there's so much obesity in our society...I think the whole point of this food discussion is to show that many of our societal problems originated from *Sesame Street*. Obesity, binge eating..." While it was clear at the time that none of these individuals were actually suggesting that Cookie Monster was a poor influence, what emerged from this discussion was that Cookie Monster and how he is portrayed are seen as extremely important—both to educators who deem cookie-binges to be inappropriate, and young adults who fondly remember the monster from their childhood.

¹⁰ I will use one or two initials for each individual represented in group discussions to preserve anonymity while being able to differentiate between the individuals.

The contrast in aesthetic between “C is for Cookie” and “Captain Vegetable” highlights the viewers’ perception of the effectiveness and necessity for these healthy messages—as well as providing a forum for discussing how health issues were handled on *Sesame Street* in the past, and how they are presented to the most recent generation. Participants expressed that having distinct characters and songs for the healthy foods, as opposed to dealing with “healthy” Cookie Monster who, by definition, eats cookies, would be more productive. One participant noted of the Captain Vegetable clip, “It’s about a big weird rabbit singing to you about vegetables, which, to me, is by far more memorable than Cookie Monster eating celery. I can learn about celery from the big weird moving rabbit on stage. But (whispering) don’t touch my Cookie Monster.” Others thought that Captain Vegetable could be effective; one person noted that “it would be very cool when we’re parents, and had trouble feeding our child vegetables, we could sing the Captain Vegetable song.” However, others suggested that this would probably not be particularly effective. As one participant noted,

I think when I was a little kid I was probably dancing around the house singing “C is for Cookie/That’s good enough for me” more than the Captain Vegetable song because it’s catchier and it’s something that kids like to think about because they can’t eat cookies all the time, their parents won’t let them, and it’s the fun part of being a kid and sticking some learning to remember in it.

This implies that both the catchiness of the song melody and the fun content of “C is for Cookie” are the features that made it most memorable; the promotion of cookie-eating habits that were later revised in songs such as “Captain Vegetable” and the new Cookie Monster song were secondary in these individuals’ memories to a sense of importance of remembering and enjoying the song from childhood. Instead, this kind of values-switch represents a shift in the underlying cultural paradigms from the 1980s to the present—one that is perceived as somewhat unsettling, especially to those who do not yet regard themselves as “old.” Changes to the Cookie Monster—besides being seen as unnecessary—are also perceived as a threat to the status quo of the educational system that shaped this particular generation.

Because the personal hygiene values expressed in “Do De Rubber Duck,” for example, continue to be central to educational values today, discussion of this song tended to be more purely nostalgic. Some did suggest that after viewing such a catchy and funny clip, more children would want to take baths—however, like with Cookie Monster or Captain Vegetable,

the primary message did not seem to be the explicit lessons of the song, but rather how the music and the action on the screen interacted to create interesting and memorable imagery.

Even more than the letters, numbers, and personal hygiene clips, the songs about self-esteem had a stronger impact on their viewers in terms of the content explicitly displayed. The tempo and visual settings of the songs were still crucial—one participant noted of “Bein’ Green” that “This song, I did not jive with it when I was a kid, just because it was slow and really sad. It didn’t come to have an important meaning in my life until I got older.” It seems that the opposite effect occurred with “Hip to Be a Square”—although overall the song was greeted with more enthusiasm, there was less emphasis on the lyrics, and more on the upbeat, music video-style of the song. Indeed, in this type of song, it seemed that in contrast to the other types of songs, specific memories and learning from the songs’ lyrics were related inversely to the tempo and energetic nature of the song. In contrast to the participant above who had thought “Bein’ Green” was too slow and sad to make an impact, another individual noted, “I remember when I was a kid...I was made fun of a lot when I was really little, and that song was always something that my parents would play for me...just, that song’s always been part of my life.” It is interesting to note here that while this song was seen as performing a specific function in this one person’s life, it was a parental connection that reinforced the meaning of the song, and made it something that was an important learning tool for this one person. The individual who mentioned the song “There is Only One Me” recalled that from the beginning he liked the message, stating that “The image of all the different kids holding hands around the Earth was cool. I love the idea of different peoples uniting as friends, and that song really frames its story of an ego-centric valuation with a statement of equality. There is only one you, so be proud and unashamed, even of your flaws—for example, the bad voice.” (The cartoon girl in the song sings in an off-key, cracked voice.) While it appears that many people missed the intended lesson of the songs as children, or were less affected in general by quiet, introspective music, for others these songs made a great deal of difference in how they viewed themselves, and were able to find their place in the larger world.

Introducing a Lasting Love of Music

The sheer diversity of types of music that were used in *Sesame Street* is astounding. The program presents in its songs a number of musical genres and forms, including reggae, opera, calypso, isicathimiya, Indian raga; waltzes, marches, ballads; and of course, a variety of parodies of popular music styles, mirroring the decades in which the specific musical clips were produced. Part of this was due the prominence of musical guest artists who appeared on the show—including popular artists such as Johnny Cash, Billy Joel, and Stevie Wonder; classical musicians like Plácido Domingo and Itzhak Perlman; and “world music” artists including Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Although many participants indicated that they did not know who these artists were at the time, these artists ultimately made a large impact upon the lives of several of the participants in this study.

In a general sense, one of the most influential parts of *Sesame Street* to these individuals was the “re-invention of popular songs”—a phrase used by several participants in the study. For many, songs like “Letter B” were familiar because as children they had heard their parents playing the original pieces on the stereo. One individual noted, “Even though I didn’t know who sang the original or what it was about, I still recognized it when it came on the TV as the kind of song that was on the radio.” Another was enthusiastic about the music videos on *Sesame Street*—as a self-proclaimed music video addict, he suggested that “maybe this is why I like music videos so much!” He requested that I play several of them, and could still remember all of the words.

Many of the group participants are musicians, and they found that the music of *Sesame Street* had made an impression on their musical lives.¹¹ They were the first to recognize some of the celebrity musicians—Celia Cruz, Itzhak Perlman, Wynton Marsalis—and to have remembered seeing them as children and having identified with them, because they loved the sound of the musicians’ playing. A vocalist indicated that she had been inspired to learn to sing from all of the guest singers—especially Celia Cruz, with whom she identified because of

¹¹ About half of the individuals in the study were pursuing or had pursued majors or minors in music; most of the other half were either still active musicians or had at least participated actively in a musical group during their childhoods.

sharing a Spanish-language background. The same individual also remembered learning the notes of the scale from the Count, when he would play each note on his organ and count up the scale with the notes. Another person cited the song “Put Down the Duckie” as a formative influence, stating that, “I knew I wanted to play the saxophone when I saw that video, and then I was a saxophone player in college.” Although there were certainly other influences that encouraged these musicians in playing their instruments, the fact that *Sesame Street* could inspire children to take up music shows that the music, especially in its clear and diverse representation of type of genres and instruments, was an influential part of their lives.

More broadly, there was a consensus among most participants that their familiarity with the songs from *Sesame Street* made them more aware of and receptive to different types of music. As one individual noted,

I’m more culturally aware of music, because I could sing all of this stuff. I mean, I didn’t know who Ladysmith Black Mambazo was, but once they told me it was the people from *Sesame Street*, I knew exactly what they were talking about, because I’d heard that and knew those sounds, and I remember going to school and having all of those sounds...

Another participant in the study shared a similar sentiment:

In hindsight, one of the things that has led me to be very interested in world musics now, and music other than pop music and western classical music, could have been this...I definitely watched these [the world music videos on the show] a lot.

This individual, now an undergraduate music major focusing on world music, continued to explain that beyond simply exposing her to different types of music, *Sesame Street* also helped convince her that music could be a career option. She explained,

I don’t know if it’s a generational thing or a cultural thing...my parents were from Mexico, but they don’t think of anything in music as being a real job at all, like even less than it is in the United States, but I’ve never had any doubt in my mind that the arts could be a valid job... I remember [watching this] ballet scene in *Sesame Street* and everything else...there was just so much music that you would not think of it as not something valid.

Although not every individual who watched and listened to the music of *Sesame Street* later became a musician, or remembered being strongly musically influenced by a specific song, it is clear that for some, *Sesame Street* provided a foundation for later musical tastes, whether

these revolved around playing music or simply consuming popular music culture. Moreover, the presence and variety of music portrayed exposed these individuals to a broad selection of music, which helped them develop more open attitudes towards consuming a variety of different types of music, enabling even non-musicians to be more culturally aware and better appreciate the music they encountered later in life.

Conclusion: Learning and the Music of *Sesame Street*

If one is looking to the data of this study to address the question of what “information” individual participants learned from the music of *Sesame Street*, the “answer” varies wildly from person to person. While most who took part in the study remembered and could comment on the songs concerning letters and numbers and those focusing on physical health and identity formation—and most reflected on how *Sesame Street* affected them musically in their lives in one way or another—the specific memories of what was considered important varied as much as the individuals themselves. Some identified most strongly with information presented in the lyrics, such as those who took messages of self-worth to heart. Others were more attuned to the music itself—catchy beats and interesting sounds made them want to dance and play musical instruments. Often, it was a combination of messages that students took away from each segment—both learning the letter “C” and evaluating cookies as a diet choice, in the case of “‘C’ is for Cookie,” or learning about numbers from the Count, as well as musical skills, and then sparking a discussion about race. Indeed, one of the few commonalities between these viewers was that nearly all of the songs that they had found to be influential were either cartoons or performed by Muppets rather than humans; as one focus group participant suggested, this was because “The adults and kids were just more people with their own lives; the Muppets were interesting and special and could do anything, just like me.” This sense of identification alone was probably what inspired individuals to remember the segments, and furthermore for them to become an active part of these individuals’ lives.

The fact that there are multiple and varied dimensions to what individuals remember learning from *Sesame Street* suggests not that the show and its music were not influential, but precisely the opposite: since these songs were so multi-faceted, people who watched and listened

to them as children appear to have digested a diverse array of information and perspectives, of which they most closely identified with some subset. All of these individual memories, taken together, suggest that what members of the generation of my research learned from *Sesame Street* was more than basic skills—instead, *Sesame Street* provided them with the basis for a type of worldview, a forum from which they were able to explore the idea that learning could be not just educational, but also fun. Further, since so many people in our society and the world over experienced *Sesame Street* and its songs as children, many are in a sense bonded together culturally by nostalgia for the show and song performances such as those shown in the program segments used in this study, which can be seen as both informing the ideals of a generation, and, in the present, serving as a forum in which to discuss important societal issues and how they should be presented to the next generation of children.

CHAPTER III

“THE COUNT IS JEWISH?”: A DISCOURSE ON DIVERSITY

From *Sesame Street*'s inception, representing race and diversity were considered to be crucial aspects of the program's social educational goals. This diversity in “race,” originally conceptualized in aims of the show as limited to the differences between phenotypic white and black communities, the program gradually expanded to include individuals of a variety of minority groups that either could or could not be linked directly to race—for example, Hispanic communities. Although the issues of race and diversity emerged in a variety of contexts within the focus groups' discussions, the issue of race sparked one of the most intense debates about diversity and representation in three major contexts—the difference of portrayal in “African-American” characters Mr. Hoots and Roosevelt Franklin, and the creation of a racially Jewish Count as portrayed by his looks, behavior, and most of all, by his musical accompaniment. In this chapter, I will discuss diversity in *Sesame Street* in the context of race by examining several examples—the musical representations of the characters Roosevelt Franklin, Mr. Hoots, and the Count. I will then discuss the issue of representation of difference more broadly within the music of *Sesame Street* as a whole.

Case #1--African-American Representations: Roosevelt Franklin and Mr. Hoots

Sesame Street, in ways that were distinctive given the period in which it originated, was from the outset designed to target a multiracial audience. Although the creators of the show were concerned with educating all children, African-American children residing in inner-city neighborhoods were considered to be a key component of the show's demographic, with extra research going into building programming specifically to portray African-American characters and appeal to the educational needs of an African-American audience. Part of this was pragmatic—according to statistical surveys of the late 1960s as presented in Robert W. Morrow's *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television*, poorer, inner-city, African-American mothers were less likely to be able to supervise their children in the afternoons, thus leaving them to entertain themselves in front of the television. Additionally, poorer

neighborhoods were often more dangerous, and children were less able to play outside, thus leaving them few options other than the television. In such areas, early parts of *Sesame Street* were broadcast in Head Start after school programs, and advertised in neighborhood publications to attempt to raise awareness about the arrival of this new, educational television show. (Morrow 2005, p. 46-54)

One way that the creators of *Sesame Street* attempted to model racial equality and appeal to African-American audiences was to have a black family living on *Sesame Street*, with longstanding cast member Gordon Robinson playing the father of this family. He and his wife Susan depicted a stable African-American couple living together peacefully with all of the other characters on a city street that was racially integrated and devoid of the racist attitudes that were in fact common in comparable “real world” neighborhoods during this period. Other ways in which *Sesame Street* presented African-American characters was through the black Muppet Roosevelt Franklin and his mother. While many of the Muppets were brightly-colored, or obviously meant to represent non-human characters, Roosevelt Franklin was a human Muppet voiced by Matt Robinson, the same actor who played Gordon, and was intended to play an African-American character. The character, however, was short-lived, possibly because too many viewers complained that he actually portrayed many negative African-American stereotypes. Throughout the 1970s and beyond, characters on *Sesame Street* were increasingly diversified to create a cast representing a large number of racial groups, including Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, and minority groups, such as women and disabled individuals. These different groups were usually represented by Muppets as well as by human actors.

As with other educational aims of *Sesame Street*, representation of minority characters occurs in the musical segments as well as in other parts of the show. While fairly portraying minorities was a sensitive business in the regular storylines, portraying them with music presented an additional challenge, especially with Muppets. What kind of voices should they have? What types of music should accompany their songs and actions? How does such sonic and musical symbolism reflect on their racial or ethnic backgrounds, and should this symbolism be readily interpretable by the viewer? How does the aural interact with the visual concerning issues of race generally?

Although participants in this study used many aspects of the *Sesame Street* segments viewed to start conversations on a number of contemporary issues in society, one to which they returned often concerned how race is represented in music, the impact that this had on them as children, and how—having re-watched and re-considered these representations—future types of educational programming should depict the “diversity” of characters.

One of the prime examples of portrayal of race in *Sesame Street* was Roosevelt Franklin. Although many individuals identified his character as more of a part of their parents’ generation of the show, several people remembered his segments. One student noted, “I always thought he was cool because he was so energetic.” However, another responded that Roosevelt was “kind of ADD-seeming, almost...watching him onscreen, it’s almost like watching kids I taught who had ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder].”

Indeed, in “Roosevelt Franklin Sings the Alphabet,” the Muppet rockets around the screen, inanely repeating parts of his mother’s phrases while she attempts to persuade him to settle down and recite the alphabet. While such a level of activity was lauded by the particular focus group member, it is easy to see how this musical example could also be construed to portray the African-American child as the one who misbehaves. More shocking to the participants during this viewing was Roosevelt’s voice and his dialogue with his mother. There was nothing odd about the music of the song, which was set to a funk beat, but many of the participants winced when Franklin’s voice entered. Although he is supposed to be an elementary school-aged character, the voice actor used his normal deep voice, which along with the inflection and tune of the song made it sound much like an older-style stereotype. Re-watching this segment myself on YouTube, I noticed one comment in particular on the webpage: “You may as well have a Muppet named Darky who does a little soft shoe and eats watermelon.” Although the members of my groups were not nearly that negative and some remembered the character fondly, there was a sense of understanding why he was pulled from the show. Despite the fact that both Roosevelt Franklin and his mother were created and voiced by African-American actors, they could be construed as racist portrayals.

A contrast to this can be found in the viewing of “Put Down the Duckie,” another song in which one individual commented on the race of a singing Muppet. This time it was Mr. Hoops, the bandleader who tells Ernie to “put down the duckie if you want to play the saxophone.” Mr.

Hoots, an owl, visually has no discernible race; however, at the beginning of the song in one session, one girl said, “You guys know he’s black?” Everyone agreed and laughed. No one had to ask what she was talking about; she was clearly talking about his voice, parlance, and demeanor. Like Roosevelt Franklin, Mr. Hoots was voiced by an African-American actor, Kevin Clash, who is better-known as the voice of Elmo, a red fuzzy Muppet who became a prominent *Sesame Street* character in the 1990s. His book, *My Life as a Furry Red Monster*, is devoted mostly to his personal background and the creation and development of Elmo, but Mr. Hoots does make an appearance where Clash discusses musical influences upon his early life. Along with church music and the latest soul and R&B hits, Clash cites Louis Armstrong as an influence—one that turned into the inspiration for the gravelly, bantering voice of Mr. Hoots. Despite Clash’s relatively good replication of Armstrong’s voice, it is not immediately obvious who Hoots is supposed to emulate—especially since his instrument is the saxophone. However, his larger-than-life attitude in conjunction with his saxophone playing could conceivably paint him as a Clarence Clemons-like character in his actions and sound.¹² This combination of instruments and characterizations could thus be seen to portray Hoots as a (quintessentially cool) pastiche of African-American sonic signatures.

How are these two situations different? Why do viewers’ racializations of one character cause offence, while the other is barely noticed? Both characters are presented fairly positively—Roosevelt Franklin is a happy kid who knows his alphabet, while Hoots is a knowledgeable and respected bandleader. Both men playing the voices of these characters used speaking and singing styles and inflections that were common in popular types of music, and both spoke grammatically, which is surprisingly not always the case in *Sesame Street*. However, Hoots is an owl Muppet, while Franklin is a child—and his skin is a color found on humans, instead of being purple, or green, or orange. Perhaps this is the difference—or perhaps it is something more subtle about how the characters interact, or indeed the fact that audiences now expect older film clips to be less sensitive to race and similar issues than those that are newer. Another difference could be the amount of exposure the audience has had to each character.

¹² Clemons is a saxophone player and personality who has worked with several major American pop artists, and whose persona lends a sort of African-American “soul” to his works.

Although Mr. Hoots appeared in more seasons of the show than Roosevelt Franklin, he was always somewhat of a minor character—by far his most famous clip is “Put Down the Duckie.” Roosevelt Franklin, though present in fewer seasons, captured audience attention perhaps because of the controversy surrounding his character. As one participant in these sessions pointed out, Roosevelt Franklin was parodied even recently by a puppet character named Franklin in the popular television show *Arrested Development*. Franklin and the character Gob record a song, “It Ain’t Easy Being White; It Ain’t Easy Being Brown”—a testament to political correctness gone awry. Whatever differences exist between portrayals of these two characters from *Sesame Street*, it is clear that their juxtaposition says something notable about how members of the generation represented in the present study interpret appropriateness and its opposite in portrayals of race.

Case #2: The Count is Jewish?

Racial characterization of African-Americans were not the only discourses about portrayals of difference that occurred in this study; the racial identification of a religious group also occurred in the discussion of the “Jewish” identity of the popular character called simply the Count, who we met earlier in connection with counting and number songs.

As mentioned previously, the Count is a vampire living in the Carpathian Mountains who loves to count. The two most popular songs involving the Count are “The Batty Bat” and “The Song of the Count.” When everyone in the room introduced themselves (by name and favorite *Sesame Street* character) at the beginning of the sessions, there was one person who even cited the Count as her favorite character, and for a surprising reason. She said that she liked the Count because “he’s Jewish”:

Ju: I’m J---...and I like the Count because he’s Jewish.

A: The Count is Jewish?

Ju: Yeah, listen to his song. It’s called “The Count’s Song.” It starts (singing) “I am called the Count. And I really love to count.” It’s totally...it’s awesome. He’s definitely Jewish. It’s great. It’s great, there’s religious diversity in Sesame Street too. You can tell; just listen to the style of the music.

At first, everyone seemed puzzled by this statement. The Count was Jewish? Why had no one ever noticed? When I asked this individual later about why she was so pleased that “the Count was Jewish,” she responded that it was not because he reflected her own family’s traditions, although she did have Jewish heritage and several close Jewish friends as a child. Instead, it was because it was “funny that *Sesame Street* would put in such blatant stereotypes.” And, having listened to these two songs again, the other participants did recognize this idea—one even said, “Wow. I totally missed that. It’s klezmer.”

While Julie recognized the Count’s music as Jewish from “the rhythms and instruments associated with it,” from “the sound of the song,” others in the group immediately were able to elaborate on how the Count’s appearance and behavior itself could be perceived as stereotypically Jewish, and not in a positive way. One noted that “Maybe the fact that he’s counting could be a reference to money...in reference to the fact that Jewish people had money and were bankers. Oh yes, it’s a huge stereotype. And he has a big nose...I mean, when you said that, that’s the first thing I thought about.”

Whether or not *Sesame Street*’s creators intended for the Count to be a Jewish character is a matter of conjecture—the way in which he is portrayed could readily be attributed to representation of his “Transylvanian” origins alone—but the “recognition” of his Jewishness by most participants in this study is telling regardless, especially in that the recognized both physical and musical stereotypes that would characterize the Count as a racial Jew. The Count’s two most popular songs, “The Batty Bat” and “The Song of the Count” are a waltz and a duple-meter dance with a strong backbeat. Particularly in “The Song of the Count,” one can hear the dramatic melodic uses of violin and clarinet. “The Song of the Count” begins with a free-meter section consisting of tremolo in the violin and other held chords that support the Count’s solo vocals. As the Count approaches the main melody, the clarinet especially moves to accentuating the backbeats, and the melody increases in tempo. The tune is in a minor mode, with accentuation on the last five notes in a descending or ascending scale to the tonic at the end of each phrase. As the Count becomes more excited by what he is singing, his vocals leave the strict notes of the melody for a more spoken vocal style, and he inserts vocalizations between the melody sections, such as “HEY-ye-ye-ye-HEY-yey-yey, that’s the song of the Count!” As he

ends the last phrase, the harmonic rhythm of the song increases to one chord per beat, and on the last cadence on the downbeat, the Count shouts “Hey!”

Calling the musical style of this song “klezmer” seems accurate. According to *The Oxford Companion to Music*, klezmer is “a musical tradition cultivated by Ashkenazi Jews in the east European diaspora...Klezmer bands, characteristically consisting of a combination of instruments drawn from clarinets, trumpets, violins, and plucked string instruments (including double bass), and often with a singer, perform music that embraces a wide range of moods from the soulful to the energetic.” (Fallows 2009) Since the word *klezmer* initially referred only to the musician specifically (principally a violinist) and then later a genre of music, klezmer as a genre can be seen to encompass many different substyles. However, by Fallon’s characterization of the basic sound of klezmer, “The Song of the Count” could easily be construed as such. Additionally, the Count’s song is in melodic minor, which is similar to several of the Ashkenazic prayer-modes, which are also used in folk music. Several of the modes are quasi-Aeolian in nature (alternating between using the flatted third, sixth, and seventh scale degree, depending on context)—similar in both pitches and the pitch alternation depending on context of the Western melodic minor. (Bohlman 1998, p. 253) In this sense, “The Song of the Count” can be seen as the closest Western adaptation of these modal sounds.

Since klezmer music has strong regional ties to Eastern Europe (and the Carpathian mountain area, home both to Bram Stoker’s iconic Dracula and also Sesame Street’s very own Count), the music may have originally been meant to evoke that region and a “vampire identity.” However, the fact that students readily interpreted all of these aspects of the Count’s characterization, both musical and physical, as a sign of Jewish identity is in the end more important than the intentions of those who have created the Count. Because he is identified as such, the Count can be seen to represent how a Jewish identity is perceived by some in the United States, and as an example for teaching children about this identity. Of course, what the song has taught is another matter—while all of the individuals in my study identified positively with the Count as children, their subsequent reactions to his characterization as adults suggest a more complex reality.

Of Race, Religion, and Other Representational Matters

Beyond the racial/religious identity issues raised by the characters of Roosevelt Franklin, Mr. Hoots, and the Count, the focus group sessions of this study generated discussion and debate on several other such issues of representation in less detail. One of these discussions centered on whether or not the dress and phenotypic features of Muppet characters during a Tito Puente piece was too “stereotypically Latin”—one Hispanic individual complained about the hairstyles, modes of dress, and playing demeanor of these Muppets, suggesting that their behavior was “so typical.” A non-racial issue of portrayal emerged in discussions about whether Bert and Ernie were gay. Regarding the latter proposition, the idea that Bert and Ernie are gay has been posited both by both pro- and anti-gay individuals and groups at least since the early 1980s (Andersen 1982), but such speculation has been flatly denied by the Children’s Television Network on multiple occasions and seems solely to be a case of adults projecting their fears and desires onto children’s culture. However, the differing interpretations of *Sesame Street* characters on such matters raise several questions: What separates appropriate representations of diversity from the propagation of potentially damaging stereotypes? What is really essential to how *Sesame Street* functions in society—the original intent of the creators, or the interpretation by the audience? How would one really interpret the perceptions of a pre-school child in any case? It is clear that the interpretation of the program’s content is important, perhaps even more than the intent of the creators—after all, in an educational setting, learning is the goal, and re-interpretations of lessons that viewers receive from the portrayal of different groups on *Sesame Street* can be seen in their later interpretations—whether these interpretations were strictly built directly from childhood experiences, or were dimply fostered by the ability to use *Sesame Street* as a forum for discourse on these subjects.

How these “minority” characters were portrayed musically also received much attention in the sessions, especially in respect to evaluations of whether or not the portrayals of these characters were appropriate. For example, of “The Song of the Count,” one person commented that she wondered “How many angry Jewish people wrote into the show after that, saying ‘I’m offended by using all of those stereotypes.’” Another individual responded, “They shouldn’t be offended, they should be happy it’s included,” while another noted that “They could have just left them out.” In this case, in this brief parlance these individuals have already conflated

“defining characteristics” with “stereotypes.” This suggests that the difference between “stereotypes” and “defining characteristics” of a group may actually then only depend on usage: by whom the portrayal is used, whether it is positive or negative, and whether it is applied uniformly to be true of all members of a group. The issue is even more complicated in a program that is meant to teach, in which context a specific portrayal will not be viewed simply as one opinion but as an essential truth. The focus group members seemed to agree that such portrayal of diversity in *Sesame Street* really was a subtle art; one that sometimes “crossed the line,” but in most cases was deserving of merit for even attempting to represent subjects that were seen to be too sensitive by other groups to be touched on at all.

Another study participant suggested that “It [the representation of the Count] could be seen as a form of appropriation as well, them taking things like Jewish stereotypes and turning them into something positive like the Count.” However, several other people protested that children would not be able to understand the idea of being “Jewish,” and the nuances between a Jewish religion and a Jewish race. Even though at least one individual recognized “stereotypically Jewish” music, she did not express that she remembered finding this “Jewishness” to be positive or negative, but rather just an unusual and interesting choice.

Throughout this entire discussion, an underlying theme was that of political correctness, how musical portrayals of the characters in *Sesame Street* had changed over time, and whether it was better to portray characters using what might be construed as negative stereotypes or to spend a lot of time explaining the differences. The general consensus among the focus group participants was that *Sesame Street* had indeed changed how it portrayed individuals of different backgrounds, both over the production era of the video clips they had viewed, and since they had stopped regularly viewing *Sesame Street*. They also agreed that the more politically correct (supposedly non-offensive) portrayals of characters were actually not helpful teaching tools, that the strong stigma associated in modern society with offending anyone. Or, as one individual put it, “I think we’re constantly making cartoons and Sesame Street more politically correct because they have to clear up the issues.” Another participant was worried about the increasingly nuanced “issues” that have emerged with a movement towards political correctness. She stated:

Nowadays people look too much into it. I think, even during *Sesame Street*, they were just trying to show diversity. They were just trying to show that this guy has

this sort of character that seems like, if he wasn't a Muppet, he would be a black guy or Jewish or something. They're showing different kinds of people, but nowadays when we're watching it we're like, "I can't believe they're showing this kind of person, they're not just making it all equal and blanket." It kind of freaks people out, and more and more issues come up nowadays whereas back then they were just like, "They're showing this kind of person and they have cool music. I think I'd like this kind of person if I met them. I think it would erase more of the racial boundaries."

This question of portrayal, while perhaps most contentious in the context of race or ethnicity, was also considered by the participants to be important in other areas where there might be differences—broadly, that the idea of "different but equal" permeates many of the societal-oriented musical segments of *Sesame Street*. One participant explicitly broadened the previous conclusions to a wider set of characters and situations.

Even Oscar the Grouch, he likes things that most people absolutely hate, and he still adores them because they're what he loves, and it's the same thing with Bert, I think...he says in the pigeon dance ["Doin' the Pigeon"] that he does it because he likes it and it makes him happy. I think the older *Sesame Street* was better at presenting diversity because now we put all of these judgment calls on everything, what was right and what was not, and it seems like now you have to be correct, you can't just show something and say "Hey, this is how it is." You have to give it a judgment call, you have to say it's good or bad. Another participant responded that children do not make these "judgment calls" inherently. She said that, "We start off innocent, thinking that everybody is the same, but then when you grow up, you see the negative side effects...but that's how kids think at the beginning, that they can be friends with anybody and everybody's cool..." Because of this innocence to societal concerns, some of *Sesame Street*'s efforts to portray diversity may be lost on children, but as she concluded, "Reinforcing good ideas can't hurt." Additionally, since parents often watch *Sesame Street* with their children, many of these messages about diversity may have been as much directed towards them as towards children. Unfortunately, these messages may not have made an impact on the parents, and thus the children who needed to hear them the most—one participant recalled that the parents of a neighboring child let him watch *Sesame Street*, but would turn the television off when the scenes became "too urban" or included "too many black people." However, the fact that these individuals were able to identify possible racism in *Sesame Street* and identify how portrayals of

race in children's television have changed in shows over the last fifty years suggests that *Sesame Street* has had some impact in this area.

Another interesting contrast was found in the viewers' impressions of race portrayal in the music of *Sesame Street* versus similar scenes from earlier cartoons that they had watched, such as *Loony Tunes*. One individual expressed the opinion that "All of those old cartoons [like Bugs Bunny] are really racist." Indeed, another mentioned that, "I can't deal with those cartoons, but this stuff [meaning *Sesame Street*]...it's like, whatever." At this point, a third person asked the second whether he grew up with those old cartoons; when he answered "no," she commented,

And that's probably why. I mean, you've been exposed to this stuff before. I mean, I went back and have been watching Disney movies that I watched a million times as a kid, like *Peter Pan*, and there's some people I want to strangle. I'm like, "Oh, this is so culturally bad" even though I grew up with it.

In its portrayal of race, *Sesame Street* may not be as equal-handed as more modern shows, but the way in which viewers have reacted to race in the show, particularly relative to the cartoon shows that they more openly criticized, suggests that perhaps the *Sesame Street* era of education has made a difference. When the primary cultural material of childhood is no longer racist, then it is easier to acknowledge differences between diverse groups of people without become engaged with stereotypes.

CHAPTER IV

SHARED PASTS, SHARED PRESENTS: HOW SESAME STREET BUILDS COMMUNITY

For most of the participants in this study, their last “in situ” viewings of *Sesame Street* occurred many years ago. The target age range for the program was narrow, and even including the time some children spent watching the program with siblings, the total number of years that any of these participants watched the show was very limited, and now far in their pasts. Yet in some ways, *Sesame Street* never died for these individuals. During our focus group sessions, they recognized songs and recommended certain ones be played; they laughed, smiled, and sang along; they recalled fondly events from their childhoods, and moreover, events from their more recent pasts. One individual recalled how “cool” it was to play the *Sesame Street* theme for jazz band; others remembered miming along to the songs during skits produced for sorority events. Several recalled products related to *Sesame Street* songs that they had noticed in stores and sometimes even purchased (my personal favorite is a t-shirt I procured at a national Latin competition while I was in high school that read “C est pro crustulo”—“C is for Cookie”). Perhaps the most striking set of comments was from one individual who was clearly deeply touched by *Sesame Street*. She said,

Isn't that funny that we come back to this when we get older? Because I did. I mean, I had my routine which involved *Sesame Street* and Mr. Rogers as a kid, so there would be like, food, TV episodes, sleep...it was like, perfect. But then once I became too cool for *Sesame Street* and then didn't become too cool for *Sesame Street* I did go back and start watching it as an older person when I was sick. It was awesome.... And it's always a bonding experience. I always have the Monday Morning of Zen with the family and I send all of them this stuff that we remember watching as kids...I send them most often *Sesame Street*, Bugs Bunny clips, and *The Muppet Show*, and we watch it together and laugh, and it reminds us of other things...like, 'Remember this?' And then you make new friends, and it's always something you talk about.

This set of comments displays a sense of continuity, both temporally and communally between individuals. *Sesame Street* is a cultural institution that links individuals to fond moments from their pasts, to beloved individuals in their pasts such as parents and siblings, as

well as to other people who they meet who have shared this same cultural experience, linked by television broadcasts but separated by both miles and years.

Of course, *Sesame Street* was not the only television show that these individuals watched as children, nor for all of them was it necessarily the single most influential experience, either in the skits or the songs. Most of the participants in this study brought other musical-television experiences from their childhoods into the conversation—the watching of *Barney and Friends*, *Eureka's Castle*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Arthur*, *Bugs Bunny*, *Doug*, and *Mr. Rogers*, to name but a notable few. However, although certain individuals may have selected one of these other shows as their personal favorites from childhood, their self-identification with *Sesame Street* and particularly its music was generally unmatched by other programs. Although this in part surely functions in tandem with how these groups were recruited—advertisements for individuals who specifically watched *Sesame Street* as children and would be willing to take time to discuss their experiences—several individuals offered other explanations for the show and its music's unparalleled popularity. One said that he “always remembered the songs most from *Sesame Street*”—that this part of the program was so catchy that it created an unparalleled experience. Another identified the show's popularity with its overwhelming popularity and longevity in American society as a reason he identified with the program so much—even over other children's television programming that also aired for long periods of time on public television. He said of *Sesame Street*,

I think *Sesame Street* in a lot of ways was almost a necessity, because you need something that was a positive influence that...would be positive and educational and teach them [children] things, and I can't imagine what it would be like as a society if we didn't have *Sesame Street* helping raise us...I mean, all of us remember watching *Sesame Street* at some point...even if you went out into campus, 90% of people will probably be like, “Yeah, I remember watching *Sesame Street* when I was a little kid.” There are very few people who didn't watch it...I don't think we could really imagine what it would be like without it.

Given the show's ubiquitous presence and impact on the lives of so many people, it is not surprising that the songs of *Sesame Street*, which were in many ways the most discrete, popular element of the show itself, have had such significant cultural influence. While it would also be possible to speak of the cultural self-identification between fans of other children's television shows—and in fact, during and after the discussion group sessions, the participants talked at

length about these other shows—or common popular songs remembered from childhood, the omnipresence of *Sesame Street* makes it somewhat of a special case. The program contained so many memorable songs and was so widely viewed that the show and its music have become thoroughly integrated into American popular culture in ways that perhaps few other cultural institutions have managed to achieve. In this final chapter, we look at the strong and enduring impact of the show, and especially its music, in the formation of cultural memory and, in turn, the building of community around collective memory.

Sesame Street for Adults?

A revealing measure of how deeply *Sesame Street* has become ingrained into popular culture is how often references to *Sesame Street* characters, skits, and songs have appeared in entertainment programs produced for adults. It is arguable that the show has always had an adult (or at least a general audience-oriented) parallel in *The Muppet Show*, another production featuring Jim Henson's Muppets that ran from 1976-1981. *The Muppet Show* is actually rather similar to *Sesame Street* in that it featured a number of song and dance sequences per episode, was noted for celebrity musical guests, and, most obviously, used Henson's Muppets. However, the show had no particular social or educational agenda, and the two shared very little specific content: the only character common to both shows was Kermit the Frog, and the shared ideas for skit content primarily limited to the "Muppet News Flash" sequences and the now famous song "Mahna Mahna." However, the two shows often shared viewers; parents of children who watched *Sesame Street* often watched *The Muppet Show*, targeted for an older demographic, as well, and included their children in their viewings, as several of the session participants fondly recalled watching *The Muppet Show* as children, and re-watching it again as adults.

More recently, direct references to and parodies of *Sesame Street* have appeared in popular television shows such as *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and the aforementioned *Arrested Development*. Although many of these references are to the characters of *Sesame Street* in general, some of them directly parody songs—for example, in one episode of *Family Guy*, the character Stewie is shown as the pinball in the pinball number count song. In no other show,

however, has the form and substance of *Sesame Street* been more systematically and comprehensively parodied than in the Broadway musical *Avenue Q*.

Avenue Q: Sesame Street in an Adult World

Although only one of the individuals who took part in this study had seen *Avenue Q*, several of the others were familiar with its premise and its soundtrack. While doing the research for this thesis, I had the opportunity to see *Avenue Q* on Broadway and to compare it to *Sesame Street*. Upon my return from New York, I discussed the show in detail with the one study participant who had seen it. Although he had heard the soundtrack and knew the premise of the production before attending, he had been impressed by how closely the show mimics the structure and tone of *Sesame Street*; this was the case for me as well, even after having researched the show before attending it.

The action is set on an inner-city New York street called “Avenue Q,” and the cast is populated by humanoid puppets and monster puppets as well as human actors. The story follows a human-puppet named Princeton who has just moved to the neighborhood as he makes friends and comes to terms with his new adult life. The structure of the musical is similar to *Sesame Street*—the action is often interrupted by songs (which bear some tangentially-related “moral”) and cartoonish skits shown via side-stage televisions that parody the educational style originally employed by *Sesame Street*—for example, instead of counting a number of objects, one television interruption features a cartoon illustration of the text: “One. Nightstand. One-night stand!” In general, the show focuses through the skits and songs on adult themes, such as sex, unemployment, and pornography; however, some of the most interesting aspects of the show are the reinterpretations of themes that were actually found in *Sesame Street*, such as making friends and understanding cultural diversity. Often the portrayals of race and ethnicity are purposely provocative. The most notable instance of this is in the song “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist,” when all of the characters—each representing a different race, ethnicity, or species—points out how the others make bigoted statements against other groups. However, instead of attempting to smooth out racial differences or decry stereotyping, the conclusion of the song is that:

If we all could just admit
That we are racist a little bit
And everyone stopped being

So PC
Maybe we could live in--
Harmony!

This sentiment from *Avenue Q* articulates a continuing development of the *Sesame Street* mentality—and closely reflects the comments that the focus group participants made about the portrayals of ethnicity and race in *Sesame Street*. Both the writers of *Avenue Q* and the focus group participants in this study commented on both the realities of race and racism, nuancing their earlier understandings spectrum of race portrayals that either coded races as inherently hierarchically ranked, or as possessing only “skin-deep” differences and being otherwise the same and equal. In *Avenue Q*, this dichotomous type of thinking is parodied with a song that suggests that racism, while undesirable and hurtful, is a present reality that cannot be exclusively applied to a single demographic. The members of the focus groups in this study examined it from a more didactic perspective, concluding that there appeared to be no good way to discuss race without risking engaging in racism, as undesirable as that might be. While both of these critiques seem to stem from the same generational influences—the even-handed, equality-based education that these young adults received as children—it is uncertain what kind of changes to educational methods, if any, individuals of this generation will employ to present what they perceive to be a realistic, but still effective methods of combating racism and other forms of discrimination in the future.

The popularity of *Avenue Q* and the attitudes of the audiences who saw the show demonstrates to some extent the power that *Sesame Street* still holds over individuals of a current generation. The writers of *Avenue Q* have woven together an fable for adults, one that discusses current pressing adult concerns in a language that is recognized and beloved from childhood—the musical and dramatic language of *Sesame Street*. The thousands of attendees to the stage production each year enjoy the show not only for its inherent worth, but because it directly makes reference to and reminds them of *Sesame Street*, reviving ways of thinking and references to music that they may not have specifically thought of in years, but that still compose a crucial part of their consciousness as adults.

Musical Culture: Adults and Children

Although the literature in ethnomusicology about children's cultures is expanding, it still seems that researchers have treated childhood as something rather discontinuous from adulthood. This general perception of discontinuity between childhood and adulthood is often culturally marked, as explored by anthropologists, in rites of passage including a "liminal state" in which the knowledge and habits are set aside for the knowledge and habits of adulthood. (Turner 1974) There is certainly some truth to this idea in current American popular culture, as was expressed by my focus group participants: while they all watched *Sesame Street* as children, at some point it stopped being a major point of culture reference—they were all "too cool" to watch it; they did not want to be seen "as babies." However, I deny the idea that the break between childhood and adulthood could erase the knowledge or the impact that these songs have had on these individuals. In John Blacking's classic work *Venda Children's Songs*, he describes the musical habits of the children of the Venda people of southern Africa, in which he confirms this idea of a disconnect between childhood and adulthood. He states, "Many Venda children's songs indeed make more sense to an adult, but by the time a person has reached adulthood, he does not bother to sing or even recall the music he sang as a child, so that in this respect the educational value of the song is negligible." (Blacking 1967, p.31) However, considering that the youngest years of childhood are often considered to be the most influential period for learning in an individual's life, it is possible that these educational messages were still received.

While in the context of *Sesame Street* culture I would agree with the first half of that statement—that adults rarely go around singing *Sesame Street* songs in their daily lives, and that adults probably understand the "meaning" of the songs better—I would disagree with the latter half, that the educational value is negligible. It might be more accurate to say that the educational value is dispersed, combined with all of the other points of learning throughout the individual's life. That does not make the learning any less valuable. While the participants in my focus group do not, in their daily lives, sing the numbers to a *Sesame Street* song, remind themselves of their self-worth by putting "Bein' Green" on their stereos, or analyze representations of race in music as presented by characters from the show, these events are embedded somewhere within their range of experience, ready to be called upon once again when needed.

Neither does Blacking's account cover the value of nostalgia. Blacking does discuss the songs as a social asset, a necessary part of joining a children's in-group, and thus later adult society at large. He does not, however, examine how this "in-group" status can extend to adulthood, and how remembering a simple song can create a link to something past, something sacred—a modern memory of childhood.

Recorded Culture and YouTube: Fueling a Hermeneutic Cycle

Our modern memories, of course, are influenced by the artifacts created in our pasts which in the present serve as reference points for our memories. Recording technology has allowed our modern society to capture a single moment in time and repeat it infinitely; Internet technology has allowed us to share that captured memory with the world. The immensely popular Internet video repository site YouTube was the primary source I used to locate *Sesame Street* video clips for this study. Notably, several of the video clips that I showed in the focus group sessions had been viewed more than a million times (as documented by the number of YouTube "hits") and almost all had been viewed at least a hundred thousand times. Though the actual number of viewers that these statistics reflect is difficult to determine with any precision (due to the fact that multiple copies of the same clip are posted and linked to other clips in a variety of ways and the same viewer may account for multiple hits), these large figures are clearly reflective of the wide audience and enduring popularity of *Sesame Street*.

I did not want to influence my own perceptions of the focus group session data by reading comments left by viewers on the *Sesame Street* YouTube clips, but after completing the sessions and analyzing the data I did return to YouTube to re-view the song clips I had showed (as well as some that we were planning to show at the sessions, but then ran out of time) and to read the "Comments" sections accompanying each. I was pleased to find that they closely reflected the reactions and attitudes of the participants in my study. Although many of the comments were simple ones of approval—"Good song!" or "Omg [oh my god]! I SWEAR TO GOD I REMEMBER SEEING THIS ON TV!!!"—many of the comments are more descriptive. On a posted video of Itzhak Perlman, one person commented, "I loved Itzhak Perlman on *Sesame Street* when I was a kid. He's definitely one of my big musical influences and the reason

I started playing the violin.” Other individuals debated the relative musical innovations and historical cultural influence of Perlman versus Paganini while another user who was disabled claimed Perlman as a role model. On one video of “The Song of the Count,” a YouTube user explained the musical style of the song to another who had commented on its variations in tempo.

The comment section of the “African Alphabet” was especially interesting. A number of viewers had used the space to argue about the appropriateness of Paul Simon’s and Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s collaboration, apartheid in South Africa, and racism in general.

Unfortunately, I encountered this debate very early in my research process, while I was still attempting to collect video clips that might possibly be popular with my peers; by the time I returned to re-examine the forum half a year later, all of the comments had been taken down and the comment function disabled due to the inappropriate nature of what had been posted.

Past viewers and *Sesame Street* fans may encounter remnants of the program again in various forms—through products, younger relatives, and old VHS recordings and other memorabilia from childhood—but YouTube and other Internet sites like it may be the primary venues for individuals to revisit these songs, along with other pieces of childhood culture, today. Moreover, these are not passive viewers, just as they were not in childhood; they comment on these videos, send them to friends, use them to discuss issues from their own lives. Elsewhere online, there are entire websites devoted to searching out songs and other videos from *Sesame Street*, where individuals convert, upload, and trade videos that remind them of precious memories from their childhood. Revisiting these videos allows the viewers once more to grow; by revisiting music that mattered to them deeply in childhood, they are able to use it to reflect upon their current situations, their lives, and how they should shape their children’s futures.

One interesting aspect of all of these interactions is that in this “natural” internet-based setting, the individuals who had posted these comments or written these requests for various *Sesame Street* videos and songs were unlikely to identify themselves as a “group,” per se, or even as “*Sesame Street* fans,” unless they were asked the question point-blank. In some ways, this is difficult to negotiate in ethnomusicology, since despite ongoing debates about the nature of music and its relationship to culture, most researchers at least insist upon the objects of their study identifying in some consistent way with the music, and to some extent, to others who listen

to this music. Past tendencies of researchers were to group individuals who, from at least an outside perspective, “belonged” to a certain musical culture by some trait—region, ethnicity, similar habits of capitalist music consumption, etc. However, since the consumers of *Sesame Street* are so diverse—encompassing millions of individuals across the globe watching, sometimes for the first time, program segments collectively covering a span of nearly forty years—being able to precisely trace the continuing influence of these *Sesame Street* songs is an extremely difficult process, both in a practical sense and in a theoretical sense. Several paradigms within anthropology and ethnomusicology may be useful for coming close to understand how such a widespread phenomenon could operate. One is Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities, found in his book of the same title. His idea—that identification within some groups is not based upon face-to-face interaction, but instead upon ideology, often propagated by some type of media entity—represents aspects of the *Sesame Street* phenomenon well. Based upon its educational content and the strong viewer reactions to the type and presentation of this content, the music of *Sesame Street* can certainly be seen to present an ideological community that stretches worldwide and was transmitted by the media. However, unlike Anderson’s models and examples, few viewers of *Sesame Street* actively perceive themselves as belonging to a group based on a *Sesame Street* culture—unlike how individuals would identify themselves, for example, as members of a nation.

The theory of the social imaginary, developed by Arjun Appadurai in part as a reaction to Anderson’s work, may bring a more productive perspective. Appadurai’s evaluation of what he calls the “social imaginary,” social links not predicated by place or direct contacts between individuals, and his method of examining it through various “-scapes” provides, on the whole, a negative perspective, viewing some part of this participation in the imaginary as coercive. However, this analysis benefits from the fact that participants in his social imaginary do not have to necessarily self-identify in these terms; this idea is further developed in a musical context in Mark Slobin’s *Micromusics of the West*, which presents the ideas of minority and ethnicity as “involuntary subcultures,” cultures that are by necessity constructed from the outside as “other.” This, however, does not fit the consumption patterns of the music from *Sesame Street* either. Past viewers of *Sesame Street* are not a minority in North America; one could even argue that

their experiences, although perhaps recalled only in recent years, provide more of a mainstream culture baseline.

The difficulties of determining the place of this musical culture suggests perhaps that a new paradigm is needed for considering how a particular unit of media functions within society. Each song-segment from *Sesame Street* provides a discrete experience: unlike a written text, the spoken or sung word, or an image, the capturing of a segment on video crystallizes that one iteration as *the* occurrence, the single “authentic” instance of the moment. The clip, broadcast and rebroadcast, sought out and reviewed, becomes some type of unchanging landmark—a place that many have visited and upon which many have meditated at different times. Those who have visited the landmark may have never met each other; nor may they actively, in daily life, recall the landmark as an important point of their existence, or have any reason to identify with others who have visited this site. Yet, their visitation of this discrete cultural event has forever changed these individuals—changes that may appear again, becoming tangential or even central to their lives, or simply be forgotten. However, despite the continued relevance (or lack thereof) of their visit, in some ways these individuals are linked; they are ones who, if the conversation ever arises, will say “I was there.”

Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to *Sesame Street*, or even to video or song as a whole. However, *Sesame Street* is a particularly pervasive and perhaps even unique case of the possible range of influence of such an audio-visual product. From the side of production and distribution, *Sesame Street* is unique due to the sheer number of children (and adults) that the program has reached over the course of its forty-year history; that alone explains part of *Sesame Street*’s impact. The fact that is associated with childhood is also important; nostalgia for childhood experiences is widespread, and has indeed even become a large part of consumer culture, as young adults, facing the pressures of being “grown-ups,” turn to objects of their childhood as a memory of simpler times.

However, the music and skits from *Sesame Street* themselves seem to be important as well. The show’s continued popularity is not only based on its pervasive nature; instead, the complexity and variety of musical segments provided information that a wide range of children could find appealing and memorable. The show spoke to the study participants as children—they identified with the characters’ personas, enjoyed dancing to the upbeat music, and earned

praise from adults for simultaneously learning academic and life skills. Later on, these same individuals would be able to catch the wordplay and cultural references present in so many *Sesame Street* songs, which increased their individual appreciation for the songs.

Upon the individual appreciation is built communal appreciation. Because these individuals were so strongly influenced by and enthusiastic about their childhood viewing of *Sesame Street*, it became a “building block” upon which they were able to form a transient sort of community. At the beginning, individuals in the study were somewhat self-isolating; they sat with participants that they already knew, and spoke in individual statements, not in conversations. As we watched the show segments, however, not even the most stoic participant could help but to crack an occasional smile. By the end of two hours of recalling *Sesame Street* songs, these individuals were engaging each other in conversations that focused not only on *Sesame Street*, but also broader societal issues, and even more private parts of their lives. Although there were differences of opinion and healthy debates about the interpretation of different musical segments and their meanings for society, in general, the individuals reflected a similar set of educational and societal ideals, and agreed upon the capacity for an educational tool such as *Sesame Street* to inform these ideals. In this sense, the watching of *Sesame Street* as children could be seen to be related to Pierre Bourdieu’s construction of *habitus*, a set of an individual’s schemes of thought and actions that are influenced by all experience, but particularly by formative environmental experiences, such as social class, family values, and education. (Bourdieu 1977) *Sesame Street*, as a large formative part of these individual’s educations, cannot only be seen in the sense of creating a set of common cultural references, but possibly even a specific way of thinking that was predicated in part by adherence to a “*Sesame Street* ontology.”

Leaving the Street: What We Learned

For two hours, the members of my focus groups ate cookies and drank sodas; we surfed the Internet for *Sesame Street* segments; we watched them, we sang along, we laughed. We told each other stories that we had never shared about ourselves to near-strangers. We debated about education, popular music, race, ethnicity, the meaning of childhood. We remembered.

At the end of two hours, everyone began to pack up their belongings, head out on separate paths that might never cross again. We said our goodbyes and walked out of the classroom and into the world, a song on our lips. But each time, some people stayed beyond the length of time I had asked them to, even as we had to step out of the room I had reserved to make way for a lecture, or the rehearsal of a trumpet quintet. On one occasion, we continued the conversation while standing outside for more than an hour after the session proper had ended, reminiscing about our childhood experiences, how we were educated, what all this, including *Sesame Street*, had meant for our present and our futures.

It was really then that the importance of this project became apparent to me. For all of the time that the *Sesame Street* lyricists, composers, and other creative team members had put into creating songs that were educational (not to mention quite catchy), it was not necessarily the content of the songs that mattered most. As children, we had watched this show because our parents thought it was “a good influence” and we had found it entertaining; they were sold on the promise of education on television that might also provide a little entertainment. In some cases, we retained those basics—we learned how to count, how to play nicely with others, that we wanted to be musicians some day—and we were able to use *Sesame Street* as a moral and educational reference from there on out. However, we could have perhaps learned all of those things from a number of other sources. Instead of being some sort of quantifiable knowledge that we have gained, in the end what my generation has drawn mainly from our experience of *Sesame Street* is a shared repository of experience that defines our collective cultural memory and positions our shared feelings of nostalgia. Because we all watched the show, sang along, danced as we watched in our youth, we now have a more closely unified worldview, and on some level, an appreciation for, say, watching Ernie sing in the bath—if it ever emerges in conversation—can link even strangers together briefly in common, fond remembrance.

The songs of *Sesame Street* are certainly not the only types of music that can have this effect. However, as stated before, the ubiquity of *Sesame Street* culture provides a good example of how nostalgia through music can function—both in specifics, such as shared remembrance of learning specific skills through song—and more generally as a cultural reference point.

As the focus group members and I walked out into the darkness, we jokingly called ourselves “*Sesame Street* addicts.” We decided to start a Facebook group—“*Sesame Street*

Anonymous.” Someone suggested we create a society to get together and watch old episodes of *Sesame Street* and other television shows that we remembered from our youth. Of course, it never happened. Culture is transient, the interests of busy college students even more so. But I like to think that taking another walk down Sesame Street has influenced them in some way. As one of the study participants noted of the show,

It sparks the right kind of interests, like in music and in learning, and being nice to people...it shows all the right things to kids, and tries to make them excited about it, like “this is fun, this is cool: you can’t be a superhero, but this is realistic, this is something you could really do.”

Many adults never achieve the dreams they had as children, and many forget the wonder of being a child and viewing the world anew. But by remembering those upbeat songs that made such an impact upon them as children, maybe individuals can come away with a stronger sense of self—or at least a smile.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE TRANSCRIPTIONS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

When transcribing notes from my videos, I tended to transcribe chronologically, leaving only synopses of conversations in my notes. I would later go back and fill in the parts that seemed important for certain points I hoped to make. As this is the case, my notes are primarily grouped by song or by topic. The process of transcription was greatly complicated by the extent to which individuals interrupted each other, and the inability of my cameras to catch all of the conversations that were happening in the room at once; therefore, my notes also reflect what I interpreted as the primary points of conversation happening at once.

The following notes are excerpts from the first and last half hour of the second session, which are representative of the general flow of conversation throughout. I have chosen these sections because they seem most pertinent to the information contained in this thesis.

Introductions (Everyone calm; walking around, getting food, coming in late)

J: I'm J----...and I like the Count because he's Jewish.

B: ...I liked the Count also, I didn't know he was Jewish...he's perhaps the most memorable character.

Ji: ...and my favorite part of Sesame Street was the use and often re-invention of popular song, my favorite being "Letter B" instead of "Let it Be." I still sing it.

S: ...my favorite part of *Sesame Street* is the re-invention of songs, or anything else in popular culture to make horrible puns, like Letter B."

J: ...my favorite characters were Bert and Ernie...but the best thing that Ernie did by far was "Put Down the Duckie."

H: ...the thing I like about SS the most is that they get really cool people to come on there and sing songs for kids.

Ad: ...the most memorable things about SS for me were the Big Bird in Japan movie and the pigeon dance.

K: "I'm K----...my favorite thing about Sesame Street are the songs, especially the ones that aren't about letters and numbers, but the ones that teach about things about life, or things that little kids would be learning for the first time because they're really interesting." (Family and child science major)

C is for Cookie (People singing and swaying along, and laughing)

J: I have a definite thought on this. This would never fly on today's Sesame Street, because I think I've heard that Cookie Monster now eats vegetables, and it's funny to me that people think that Cookie Monster is so influential that he's teaching you to eat bad by nomming on cookies and doughnuts and had to be changed to eating vegetables to promote healthy eating habits amongst kids.

A: Cookies are now called 'sometimes foods.'

Ju: Like, is there now, celery monster?

A: Let's see if there's one that has vegetables.

B: There's kind of this drug addict thing about Cookie Monster.

Ad: (talking about comedic portrayals of Cookie Monster as an addict, locked in a bathroom and eating cookies)

M: It's like, what have you done with my childhood?

J: "I'm sorry for ruining Christmas for you, Ju---."

Ju: "I'm going to cry."

Captain Vegetable (laughing; responding to "do I look like a weirdo?" with nodding)

J: It's about a big weird rabbit singing to you about vegetables, which, to me, is by far more memorable than cookie monster eating celery. I can learn about celery from the big weird moving rabbit on stage. But (whispering) don't touch my Cookie Monster.

H: I mean, he doesn't give you any option...you can eat vegetables and spaghetti, I mean, what's wrong with spaghetti?

J: It's a combination food. (everyone laughs)

H: Can I admit something? I think I watched Sesame Street, as a kid, twice. Sesame Street is a new thing to me, like on Youtube. (Was a Nicktoons kid)

J: Isn't that funny that we come back to this when we get older? Because I did. I mean, I had my routine which involved Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers as a kid, so there would be like, food, TV episodes, sleep...it was like, perfect. But then once I became too cool for Sesame Street and then didn't become too cool for Sesame Street I did go back and start watching it as an older person when I was sick. It was awesome.

K: I think when I was a little kid I was probably dancing around the house singing "C is for Cookie/That's good enough for me" more than the Captain Vegetable song because it's catchier and it's something that kids like to think about because they can't eat cookies all the time, their parents won't let them, and it's like, the fun part of being a kid and sticking some learning to remember in it.

S: That's true, it's some fantasy fulfillment there with "C is for Cookie" that just isn't there with vegetables.

A: I think it's pretty cool that Cookie Monster is a monster and then Captain Vegetable is like, a hero, a hero for eating vegetables, whereas Cookie Monster is like, a beast for eating only cookies.

H: Well, Cookie Monster developed actually out of IBM ads where it was just this monster that ate a computer. (laughter)

Put Down the Duckie (tangent to discussing “African Alphabet”)

J: I know I wanted to play the saxophone when I saw that video, and then I was a saxophone player in college.

S: I was impressed by the sheer variety of guest people. They had Itzak Perlman on there, that really impressed me. That was a pretty impressive variety of people they got to be in this one song.

J: And now that I’m older, I’m really curious as to when the was made in comparison to when Paul Simon’s Graceland was made, just because he appears in both—

B: I bet it’s pretty darn close.

Ji: It was the same set, Ladysmith Black Mombazo and Paul Simon on the same set.

B: Maybe it was inspired by a lot of annoyed parents whose children played too much with their rubber duckies.

Adriana: Or something else, like your slippers.

J: And you see things like this, and you have to ask, how much of it was for the children and how much of it was for the parents, because I had no idea who those people were, as a kid.

A: And that explains the variety of people, I mean, it’s for every demographic of parent.

Ju: Was that Celia Cruz in there?

Ad: ...the one artist that always stood out to me, it was on one show on the Muppet Show and I think I only saw it once, they made a joke about his assless pants..the animal was wearing assless pants...and it stuck with me to this day, whenever I think of the Muppet show it’s one of the first things that comes to mind.

I Love Trash (laughing)

A: Well, you know, he loves trash. He knows what he likes, and he’s not pushing it on anybody, he’s just expressing how much he’s passionate about trash. I think that’s unique, and you gotta respect that.

H: I personally feel that like, Oscar doesn’t need material objects, he just needs what’s sentimental to him. Like, he was saying, he got that shoe from his mother and he loves it..but he did say he love it because it’s trash, so maybe it is just the material objects.

A: It’s kind of blatantly out there, but one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.

J: But are you really like, learning that as a kid? This is entertainment.

B: Or are you just like, haha, he likes trash?

J: Maybe this shows a shift in Sesame Street programming, from Oscar the Grouch who sings a song maybe for entertainment, because people sing songs on children’s TV shows to the overt message of eat your vegetables in Captain Vegetable...I mean there’s a pedagogical...

Ju: I wonder if Oscar talks about recycling now.

H: Maybe there’s a generation of hoarders...because if Oscar loves trash, I love it too.

J: I'm sure there was some kid that kept his trash in his room and sang that song and his parents.

B: (something about social order and the class system)

An: When I was 3-4 years old, my parents actually required that I watch Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers.

A: All these shows had a lesson. Even Power Rangers.

J: Because the TV became the babysitter. People are throwing their kids in front of the TV, it's like the school becoming the parent as well, this degradation of "parents actually doing their jobs."

A: Also I think that it was a requirement that children's programming have, edifying content.

A: Did you guys ever have, like we talked about the shoes with Rubber Duckie, but I definitely had stuff that was like, old and tattered and my parents wanted to throw it out and I was like, 'No, mine!' And in that situation, I want to be able to pull out "I Love Trash."

The Count

A: The count is Jewish?

Ju: Yeah, listen to his song. It's called "The Count's Song." It starts (singing) "I am called the count. And I really love to count." It's totally...it's awesome. He's definitely Jewish. It's great. It's great, there's religious diversity in Sesame Street too. You can tell; just listen to the style of the music.

J: And maybe the fact that he's counting could be a reference to money...in reference to the fact that Jewish people had money and were bankers. Oh yes, it's a huge stereotype. And he has a big nose...I mean, when you said that, that's the first thing I thought about.

Ju: I always thought it from the sound of the song.

J: And I mean, musically they could do that...

Song starts:

J: WOW. I totally missed that. It's klezmer.

J: I wonder how many angry Jewish people wrote into the show after that, saying I'm offended by using all of those stereotypes.

H: They shouldn't be offended, they should be happy it's included.

A: I mean, they could have just left them out.

J: I mean, it could be seen as a form of appropriation as well, them taking things like Jewish stereotypes and turning them into something positive like the Count.

Multiple: The kids wouldn't catch that.

A: I mean, they wouldn't say that's a Jewish song, that's dumb.

General Questions: What's it like seeing this stuff again?

A: It jogs the memory.

B: A little bit, yeah

J: It's fun, because it's one of the few positive things that I remember from being a kid.

Ag: I remember not thinking it was that educational as a kid, like the letters and numbers and stuff, but you realize more and more that they stick in a lot of stuff to teach kids. You see a song or a funny animal and you realize, looking back now, you can analyze it and see that there's a lot more to it, a lot more effort put into it.

Ab: I'm almost concerned about going back and watching it, that it might tarnish it.

S: I'm getting nostalgia for things that I didn't, like, I didn't actually listen to the Beatles when I was younger, like I was a little kid, but looking back at it now, I feel, like, Beatles nostalgia, almost because when there's this childhood theme of *Sesame Street*, when you go back to it as an adult, you end up having nostalgia for things that weren't actually nostalgic for you as a kid but now there's this sense of cultural nostalgia I guess, that you tap into with something that everyone associates with childhood, like *Sesame Street*, whether or not you actually listened to that as a kid.

A: That's kind of interesting, because it ties into something we noted last time, which was that they have a variety of music on *Sesame Street* that's culturally diverse in music they sample, not just pop hits.

Ad: I had completely forgotten that they...I know I had heard the duckie song, but I had no idea at the time that it was reggae at all...it's kind of very subversive. I don't know, my parents really...I mean, they fostered music a little bit, it was always cultural...and now I see why my parents made me watch it so much. Now I see why.

General Question: Did *Sesame Street* show up anytime between childhood and adulthood?

S: It's like a cultural inside joke. You don't even have to watch it as a kid, and people still refer to it all the time for a source of laughter.

Ad: For me, it's more the Muppets...for me, the Muppet treasure Island has been a part of my life forever...and I mean, I found out the guy Curry, the guy who played the main villain, when I watched Rocky Horror for the first time, I realized who he was, and I was like, "Oh my God, he's playing a trans-something in this movie..."

A: Trans-everything....

Ad:... and it was, it made so much more sense. I guess the songs and the way I've remembered have impacted me.

General Question: Would you show it to your kids? (All affirmative; "only the old ones..the old, politically-incorrect stuff, none of this new stuff")

J: It's the same with Bugs Bunny and all of that stuff...and with Bugs Bunny too, that's funny, because that was our family language stuff...that's what we quoted to each other.

B: All of those old cartoons are really racist.

A: And I can't deal with those cartoons, but this stuff...it's like, whatever.

J: Did you grow up with those old cartoons?

A: No.

- J: And that's probably why. I mean, you've been exposed to this stuff before. I mean, I went back and have been watching Disney movies that I watched a million times as a kid, like *Peter Pan*, and there's some people I want to strangle. I'm like, "Oh, this is so culturally bad" even though I grew up with it.
- B: But there's some certain line with Looney Tunes, I think I wouldn't show my kids the stuff from like the 40s or whatever because that's really, really bad.
- Ab: There's like, you can find it on Youtube, a Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck cartoon where Daffy is actually a Nazi soldier. And it shows him speaking...like yelling out gibberish, and maybe it sounds German, and going crazy because the Fuhrer is coming, and then Bugs Bunny the American is coming.
- B: There's one where he fools Elmer Fudd by pretending to be Chinese.
- A: I definitely remember that...
- Ad: I think bugs bunny is the only thing I've seen directed towards children where cross-dressing is okay.
- A: In many cartoons, cross-dressing is accepted.
(Bugs Bunny is gay? He did like carrots.)
- Ab: I think we're constantly making cartoons and *Sesame Street* more politically correct because we have to they have to clear up the issues.
- Ag: Nowadays people look too much into it. I think, even during *Sesame Street*, you know, they were just trying to show diversity, they were just trying to show that this guy, like, kinda has this sort of character that seems like, if he wasn't a Muppet, he would be like, a black guy or Jewish or something you know and it's like, they're showing different kinds of people, but nowadays when we're watching it we're like, "I can't believe they're showing this kind of person, they're not just making it all equal and blanket." It kind of like freaks people out, and more and more issues come up, nowadays, and more issues come up, where as back then they were just like, "They're showing this kind of person and they have cool music. I think I like this kind of person if I met them. I think it would erase more of the racial boundaries.
- Ad: And I think, like, even Oscar the Grouch, he likes things that most people absolutely hate, and he still adores it because it because it's what he loves, and it's the same thing with Bert, I think...he says in the pigeon song that he does it because he likes it and it makes me happy or whatever. I think the older *Sesame Street* was better at presenting diversity because put all of these judgment calls on everything, what was right and what was not, and it seems like now you have to be correct, you can't just show something and say "hey, this is how it is" you have to give it a judgment call, you have to say it's good or bad.
- J: Yeah, and we do that with everything in society, and everything in our lives, and that's why we grow up to be guilty, dissatisfied people.
- Ju: We start off innocent, thinking that everybody is the same, but then when you grow up, you see the negative side effects, but that's why it's good to reinforce it...but that's how kids think at the beginning, that they can be friends with anybody and everybody's cool...

What's the impact of *Sesame Street*?

J: I'm more culturally aware of music, because I could sing all of this stuff. I mean, I didn't know who Ladysmith Black Mambazo was, but once they told me it was the people from *Sesame Street*, I knew exactly what they were talking about, because I'd heard that and knew those sounds, and I remember going to school and having all of those sounds and lulling myself to sleep with different musics in that way.

As: I think it's good because it sticks in your head, and if it's a song you sing all the time, like the song with the letter B, then you're learning about letter b, like "Buh buh buh"...I mean, it's good because I liked the music already, but then I would go to school and already, I see the letter C and I remember it from *Sesame Street*, and it's already in my head from when I sang along...it taught me my letters and stuff from before I went to school...I mean, but I don't think that's the main impact of *Sesame Street*, but definitely I think that's good.

Ad: I mean, I don't know if this is actually what happened, but...in hindsight, one of the things that has led me to be very interested in world musics now, and music other than pop music and western classical music, could have been this, because just the same, I started reading when I was like, 3 years old, and it was because I watched this all the time and my parents were...they'd push learning as much as possible, as much as possible, and I definitely watched this a lot, so, I mean..

Ab: I mean, like someone mentioned earlier, like, how we all had a babysitter...parents were starting to work longer, or both parents were going to work, I think *Sesame Street* in a lot of ways was almost a necessity, because you need something that was a positive influence that...would be positive and educational and teach them things, and I can't imagine what it would be like as a society if we didn't have *Sesame Street* helping raise...I mean, all of us remember watching *sesame Street* at some point, there's not like there's one person here, even if you went out into campus, 90% of people will probably be like "yeah, I remember watching *sesame street* when I was a little kid, they're very few people who didn't watch it...I don't think we could really imagine what it would be like without it because it was so, impactful...

A: It's definitely not a violent thing to show in any way...and I think one of the things we moaned about was the blatant PC culture we saw in later *sesame street*, but we also talk about the kind of things that stick in our head, we kind of remember it...it's interesting because it does plant seeds for our future, and it's a great vehicle for communicating values with children. And especially the songs, I always remember the songs the most from *Sesame Street*.

J: And it's always a bonding experience. I always have the Monday Morning of Zen with the family and I send all of them this stuff that we remember watching as kids...I send them most often *sesame street*, bugs bunny clips, and the Muppet show, and we watch it together and laugh, and it reminds us of other things...like, remember this? And then you make new friends, and it's always something you talk about. And in class, with you guys in class, I would play *Sesame Street*, like "Put Down the Duckie," and I would ask, how does this tie into what we're going to talk about today? Who knows about Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo? It's like this cultural base that we all can tap into."

Ag: It sparks the right kind of interests, like in music and in learning, and being nice to people...it shows all the right things to kids, and tries to make them excited about it, like “this is fun, this is cool: you know like...like you can’t be a super hero, but this is realistic, this is something you could really do.

Ad: And now that you mention that, the mere fact that they have people in a video where you learn about different types of jobs and all that...one thing, I don’t know if it’s a generational thing or a cultural thing...like my parents were from Mexico, but they don’t think of anything in music as being a real job at all, like even less than it is in the United States, but I’ve never had any doubt in my mind that the arts could be a valid job, and I remember a ballet scene in sesame street...there was just so much music that you would not think of it as not something valid.

APPENDIX B

SONG DATA

This table includes the titles, composers and lyricists, and original release dates for all of the songs mentioned in this thesis, where available. This data was collected from a site open to editing by all users, the Muppet Wiki (http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Muppet_Wiki); the data was then checked against a number of sources listed as the origins of this information, but most importantly, *The Sesame Street Songbook*.

Song Title	Composer; Lyricist, if separate	Original Air Date
African Alphabet	Joe Raposo	1987
The Alligator King	Bud Luckey; Donald Hadley	1971
The Batty Bat	Joe Raposo	1986
Bein' Green	Joe Raposo	1970
'C' is for Cookie	Joe Raposo	1971
Captain Vegetable	Jeff Moss	1982
Cereal Girl	Cheryl Hardwick; Cathi Rosenberg	1989
Do De Rubber Duck	Christopher Cerf/Norman Styles	1986
Doin' the Pigeon	Joe Raposo	1973
I Love Trash	Jeff Moss	1970
It's Hip to Be a Square	Unknown	1989
Ladybug Picnic	Bud Luckey; Donald Hadley	1971
Letter B	Christopher Cerf	1983
Mahna Mahna	Piero Umiliani	1969
Martian Beauty	Bud Luckey	1972
One of These Things	Joe Raposo, Jon Stone and	1969

	Bruce Hart	
People in My Neighborhood	Jeff Moss	1969
Pinball Number Count	Walt Kraemer	1977
Put Down the Duckie	Christopher Cerf/Norman Styles	1986
Ran Kan Kan	Tito Puente	1993
Roosevelt Franklin Sings the Alphabet	Unknown	1970
The Song of the Count	Emily Perl Kingsley and Jeff Moss	1974
There's Only One Me	Unknown	Unknown; probably 1970s
The Word is No	Christopher Cerf	1990

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 5/16/2008

To: Elizabeth Clendinning

Address: 2959 Apalachee Parkway, Apt. B19
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Narratives of Sesame Street: Music, Memory, and Meaning

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 5/15/2009 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved

by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Michael Bakan, Advisor
HSC No. 2008.1266

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Narratives of Sesame Street: Music, Memory, and Meaning: FSU Consent Form

You are invited to be in a focus group study examining memories and reactions to music in the television show *Sesame Street*. You were selected as a possible participant because you watched *Sesame Street* as a child. You will be asked to view brief segments from *Sesame Street* programs and discuss what you might remember or notice, if anything, about these segments. This study will last for a single session of approximately two hours, and will be videotaped. Light refreshments will be provided.

There are no particular risks to this study. Potential benefits to the participants will be potential enjoyment of musical segments about which they may have memories. Benefits of the study in general include a richer understanding of the music of *Sesame Street*'s place as a cultural phenomenon.

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. Subjects will not be identified by name in published reports of this study. All video recordings of this event will be kept securely and only the primary researcher and faculty advisor will have access. Video segments will only be presented with consent of the participants.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

The researcher conducting this study is Elizabeth Clendinning, a master's student in Ethnomusicology in the Florida State University College of Music. You may ask any question you have now. If you have a question later, you are encouraged to contact her by email at eac07j@fsu.edu, or her faculty advisor, Professor Michael B. Bakan, at mbakan@fsu.edu or (850) 644-3424. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the FSU IRB at 2010 Levy Street, Research Building B, Suite 276, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742, or 850-644-8633, or by email at jjcooper@fsu.edu. You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature

Date

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth A. Clendinning was born in New Haven, Connecticut and raised in Tallahassee, Florida, where she attended Lawton Chiles High School from 2001-2004, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She studied classics, anthropology, and music at the University of Chicago, graduating in 2007 with an A.B. in Music. Honors awarded to her include being a National Merit Finalist, Dean's List throughout her undergraduate career, and acceptance into the honor societies Phi Beta Kappa, Pi Kappa Lambda, and Phi Kappa Phi. Her research interests are varied, a fact reflected by her two forthcoming publications: "The Call of Cthulhu: Narrativity of the Cult in Metal" (with Kathleen McAuley; published by Interdisciplinary Press, title TBA, 2009); and "Spike Ensouled: The Sonic Creation of a Champion" (*Music in the Whedonverse*, Scarecrow Press, 2009). She enjoys culinary adventures, archaic languages, and excavating dinosaurs. She has been a fan of *Sesame Street* since she was born.