Remembering the Architects of *Sesame Street*

Biopolitics, Blackness, and Preschool in the 1960s

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SEVERAL INFLUENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS have endorsed mass media educational initiatives, also known as "edutainment," as a cost-effective strategy to address learning loss during the pandemic (Catellani, 2021; Haßler et al., 2020; Nugroho et al., 2020). Drawing from discourses within international development and education, the term "edutainment" or variants thereof can be traced back to colonial radio education initiatives in the 1960s. It is important to acknowledge the pre-existing performative, entertaining methods of education that have existed across the world for centuries; as such, the term "edutainment" here is critiqued, not as a means to deny storytelling as a pedagogical approach, but rather in relation to use of technology to both entertain and educate mass audiences by Western geopolitical powers. Such initiatives are typically characterized as a cost-effective approach to addressing social inequalities. In relation to the pandemic, it seems that edutainment has more potential today than ever before, as funding for education dwindles and pressure for accelerated learning increases.

In considering the future of edutainment, *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Research* (Farrell et al., 2015) claims that *Sesame Street*'s early research "demonstrated the power of well-crafted educational media" and recommends future initiatives to follow their lead (p. 403). A recent British evaluation of an African edutainment initiative echoed *Sesame Street*'s traditional evaluation model by estimating cost-effectiveness, defined as "the least cost approach to … raising [attainment]," to be less than one cent per child per year (Watson et al., 2021, p. 648). The framing of edutainment, and specifically Sesame Workshop, as a cost-effective part of the solution to the global "crisis of learning" during the pandemic has been echoed by UNICEF (Nugroho et al., 2020), global non-profits such as EdTech (Haßler et al., 2020), and such media as *The Wall Street Journal* (Catellani, 2021). The most critical response to this excitement from those who study education might be to review and learn from what is already written about historical edutainment programs.

Texas Republican Senator, Ted Cruz, epitomized our national misunderstanding of *Sesame Street* by recently criticizing Big Bird. On his podcast, *The Verdict*, Cruz (in Cruz & Knowles, 2021) regarded the fictional character's tweet suggesting he was vaccinated against COVID-19 as

"government propaganda, for your 5-year-old" (n.p.). Among the liberal backlash to Cruz's comment was film executive Franklin Leonard's (as quoted in Rahman, 2021) tweet that Cruz "thinks HBO Max is the government" (para. 9), referring to the 2016 re-homing of *Sesame Street* from PBS to HBO Max (Pressler, 2016). Contrary to the common misconception that *Sesame Street* is a program of the federal government, the bulk of its initial and continued funding are private donors; government funds have historically played an intermittent and subsidiary role (Fandom, n.d.).[1]

Current funding of Sesame Workshop is difficult to assess due to the complex network of affiliated for-profit and international entities; for example, the audit of Sesame Workshop and subsidiaries for the 2020 fiscal year reports about $360,000 in net assets (Grant Thornton, 2021), while the self-published annual review reports net assets at $361 million for that same year (Sesame Workshop, 2020). The annual review also lists major supporters, the largest of which are the LEGO Foundation and MacArthur Foundation, having contributed at least $25 million each.

Toward the aim of looking backward to the history of edutainment prior to moving forward, the current analysis is structured firstly through a conceptual framework and overlay of historical context, and then through a narrative history of the construction of the *Sesame Street* curriculum from 1966-1969 chronologically through key figures, or "architects," of the program. Next, I summarize the prospects of Sesame Workshop in 1970, after the premiere of the first season. The summative analysis describes three ways the architects of Sesame Street both contributed to and subverted national trends in education leading up to the 1970s in terms of their constructions of the "disadvantaged child," roles in establishing the neoliberal centrality of the private sector in education, and influences on federal funding for public preschools. The concluding section poses questions and possible considerations for academics in education to consider when "the next big thing" in edutainment inevitably begins to surface.[2]

Conceptual Framework

My current approach to the field blends Daniel and Laurel Tanner's (1990, as cited in Pinar et al., 1995) curriculum studies as "collective memory of the field of curriculum" (p. 124) and MacDonald's (1971, as cited in Pinar et al., 1995) curriculum theory as "committed to human fullness" (p. 181). And yet, remembering" the history of curriculum also necessitates a limitless number of choices in *which* historical frameworks to apply to *which* sets of memories; specifically, I believe that Black education must be remembered in a way that is polyphonic both in framework and narrative, an ambition I attempt in the current analysis through layered methodology, theory, and structure. Working from and beyond this understanding of curriculum, I take an expansive look at the curriculum of *Sesame Street* in order for this work to be relevant to a wide range of professionals who all have different types of investments in curriculum. My current methodology interprets what Pinar et al. (1995) refer to as a commitment to "human fullness" within Barad's (2006) concept of ethico-onto-epistemology, an acknowledgement of the "intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being" (p. 185).

I understand childhood as historically situated and socially constructed in its meaning and function, in Western modernity associated with young children requiring active guidance to develop their abilities and needing protection from various environmental threats (Aries, 1962). Borrowing from the work of Amartya Sen (1999), I view educational goals such as cognitive development and school readiness as *means* to overcome "intergenerational transfers of poverty"

rather than *ends* in themselves (Ballet et al., 2011, p. 31). In this perspective, quantitative analysis is an incomplete representation of the ethical value of early childhood education interventions. As the literature base on *Sesame Street* and similar edutainment initiatives often comprises of publications that are informal or otherwise not peer reviewed, I undertake this analysis through a synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship, documentaries, primary sources, and other "grey literature." Despite grey literature being in many ways an academic taboo, the story of *Sesame Street* is one that has been primarily documented outside of academic scholarship. Following the precedent of others (e.g., Govender, 2013) who critically examine edutainment initiatives, especially within the intersections of philanthropy and education, grey literature within their limitations have been integral to this analysis as providing key information about the timeline, design, programmatic goals, and evaluation of *Sesame Street.*

Drawing upon Winfield's (2007) work, I consider *Sesame Street* a cultural artifact "imbued with scientific language" of developmental psychology to appeal to the American "cultural perception of value" in the late 1960s (p. 34). The historical narrative I seek to unravel takes structural inspiration from Watkins's *The White Architects of Black Education* (2001). By organizing my analysis of the formative years of *Sesame Street* in terms of the specific, named, "white architects" of "Black education," I tell the story of how several elite, powerful white men—and one woman—took the principles of social efficiency, eugenics, mental measurement, and deficit narratives of Black families to mass produce a curriculum for America's "inner-city" preschoolers in the late 1960s.

The Architects of *Sesame Street*

Andrew Carnegie might perhaps be considered the first architect of *Sesame Street*, a ghost, or even a phantom architect, for although he was not alive during the creation of the show, his philosophy on wealth and philanthropy set the stage for these sunny days. It was through Carnegie's fortune in which he was able to continue to impact the material world from beyond the grave, specifically through the private foundation in his namesake, The Carnegie Corporation, which in many ways seeks to bring his political and philanthropic legacy to fruition past the time of his death.

Andrew Carnegie, Founder of the Carnegie Corporation

A person of such wealth and power that he shaped, not only American history in his lifetime, but continued to shape political and material realities from beyond the grave, it is important to know what Andrew Carnegie's political views were. In his obituary, Carnegie's political views were described as somewhat Republican, with the caveat that he was a "violent opponent of some of the most sacred doctrines" (*The New York Herald*, 1919, p. 10). For example, he was known as an advocate for disarmament[3] and was influential in the formative years of the League of Nations; this interest in international affairs would continue in his legacy through the Carnegie Corporation (Stead, 1901). Most importantly, his political philosophy seemed to align most with the defense of the free market, an ideology that heavily influenced his approach to philanthropy and foreshadowed the neoliberal era to come.

In an age in which social issues were not typically addressed through the principles of business, Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth," sought to establish "a new breed of entrepreneurs to prevent problems through early intervention," "use of social science," and "involvement in public policy" (Sievers, 2010, p. 103). Carnegie (1889) advised wealthy "social entrepreneurs" to do for "his poorer brethren" that which "they would or could [not] do for themselves" (p. 662). At a time in which individual excess accumulation was seen as a threat to democracy in America, Carnegie's philosophy of social uplift through charity functioned "in maintaining the established socio-economic order" (Harvey et al., 2020, p. 33). Through the "Gospel of Wealth," wealth was accumulated by white men fairly through hard work and merit, and those who attained very wealthy socio-economic statuses had the duty to use their hard work, merit, and capital to improve the lives of others—not through ethical business practices—but through strategic, restricted charitable donations. Despite the failure of Carnegie to live up to his promise of giving away his fortune within his lifetime,[4] his "Gospel of Wealth" continues to inspire modern billionaires such as Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, or Elon Musk, to make grand philanthropic pledges. Such billionaires claim their philanthropy is for the betterment of society, when in reality it sustains the current social order by creating a carefully-crafted illusion of fairness. In truth, the marriage of private equity and philanthropy results in wealthy white men such as Carnegie haunting society with their undue influence for decades or even centuries after their demise, often having power that should be endowed to the people in a democratic state.

Carnegie's haunting influence on society is made explicit in a statement made after his death in which he left two colleagues as the initial trustees of his philanthropy, granting them "full authority to change policy" as long as they "best conform to [his] wishes by using their own judgment" (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, n.d.-b, para. 7). Since 1919, the foundation has been under the management of a paid, full-time president, who works under the careful advice of the trustees. The Carnegie Corporation has been profoundly influential in the past century, including through the shaping of higher education through the "Carnegie Classification of Institutions of High Education," and despite the ultimate aim being to give away all of the fortune, its funds show no sign of waning, with an estimated endowment of $3.5 billion as of 2018 (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2018). The late 1960s were an especially opportune time for private philanthropy to influence public policy, and the acting presidents of the Carnegie Corporation during this period had particularly close ties to American politics.[5]

Alan Pifer, President of the Carnegie Corporation

Alan Pifer served as the foundation's acting president from 1965-67, while former president John W. Gardner served as President Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education & Welfare. Although he was not acting president of the foundation, Gardner influenced the path of *Sesame Street* through his privileged position to facilitate government partnership, as well as his ties to Educational Testing Services (ETS). Alan Pifer had served in World War II, and in the five years before joining the Carnegie Corporation had administered the Fulbright Program in the United Kingdom. These experiences likely shaped his intention to take *Sesame Street* internationally, but perhaps also ties into critiques of *Sesame Street* as an instrument of American cultural imperialism abroad through promoting American values and educational values across diverse cultural contexts.

According to Davis (2008), Pifer responded to popular claims for foundations to address issues of power and wealth through three interlocking objectives: prevention of educational disadvantage, equality of educational opportunity in the schools, and broadened opportunities in higher education. Ironically, Pifer framed these objectives as unified in an overarching goal of improving the democratic performance of government, the irony being that providing for education is a matter of governmental intervention, rather than that of private equity. Pifer also led grants towards government reform, educational litigation, voter education, and initiated a program to train Black[6] lawyers in the South as well as increased foundation activities in South Africa.

We can see that Pifer influenced public policy through his role at the Carnegie Corporation in 1967, in which he and Gardener advocated for Johnson to establish the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with the philanthropy committing a one million dollar grant to the project as soon as it was established (Davis, 2008; The Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2005b). The founding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting exemplifies the issue with public-private partnerships of this scale—that being that the Carnegie Corporation provided a significant amount of funds for the start of this program, but the government did not have a long-term plan for sustaining it, nor was the program such a priority as other pressing matters, such as the funding of public education.

Barbara Finberg (1990), who held various positions at the Carnegie Corporation between 1959 and 1997 (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2005a), provided insight into the inner-workings of the foundation in a publication entitled "Support for Science From a Foundation Perspective." Finberg previously worked for the U.S. State Department and the Institute of International Education and was integral in the initial planning of *Sesame Street*. Finberg (1990) describes the board of trustees as integral to shaping grant-making efforts, making it explicit that "a foundation's board has final grant-making authority;" she describes foundation boards as "usually self-perpetuating" in which members "reflect the views and values of those who choose them" (p. 58). Finberg describes the grantmaking process as ultimately a conversation between the board and scientific community (p. 60).

Lloyd Morrisett, Founder of Children's Television Workshop

Before joining the foundation, Morrisett taught experimental psychology at several universities. His philanthropic views closely mirrored those of Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth, through what he termed "venture capital for social benefit" (Morrisett, 1997, p. 5). At the Carnegie Corporation, he developed an interest in early childhood as well as desire to reach more "disadvantaged children" to reduce the achievement gap in a more cost-efficient way (Agrelo, 2021). It was at a dinner party at Joan Goaz Cooney's house in which WNDT producer, Freedman (as quoted in Davis, 2008), wondered "aloud what it might take for the network program lords to strive higher for America's children" through intentional children's television programming (p. 14). At the time, TV was often regarded as a "wasteland" inappropriate for children, a concept drawn from FCC Chairman Minow's (2003/1961) speech to the National Association of Broadcasters. As the Carnegie Corporation had just begun to commit funds to the educational achievement gap of preschoolers, Morrisett considered Freedman's comment and asked Cooney about her thoughts on educational children's programming.

Joan Goaz Cooney, Executive Director of *Sesame Street*

Cooney, having completed her undergraduate degree in education, had worked on films addressing poverty for several years; notable of these is her Emmy-winning documentary on children's relief programs entitled *Poverty, Anti-Poverty and the Poor* (Davis, 2008). As Cooney became increasingly interested in Morrisett's question of whether television could educate children, her initial concept for a program was inspired by observations of her grandchild reciting jingles from commercials (Polsky et al., 1974). In 1966, she submitted an initial proposal to conduct a feasibility study; the foundation quickly approved her request, which Finberg (as quoted in Davis, 2008) described as a "chance to find out whether television … can offer all children a head start on their education" (p. 65). While possibly coincidental, the early word play on "head start" indicates the growth of *Sesame Street* in relation to the government preschool initiative, established only a year prior.

To inform her feasibility study, Cooney interviewed psychologists and educators throughout the country who she generally regarded as "supportive of [the] idea … even though no one knew *if* you could do it" (Davis, 2008, p. 66). Among those interviewed was Harvard cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, who reportedly said "we cannot wait for the right answers before acting. Rather, we should look upon the first year of broadcasting for preschoolers in the nature of an inquiry" (Davis, 2008, p. 66). Cooney (1966) constructed the "disadvantaged child" as coming from a disengaged family, "inadequately stimulated and motivated," and requiring "adequate compensation" (p. 13). She reflected Bruner's earlier mention of the urgency of the issue, commented that an expanded Head Start will not happen in "foreseeable future" (Cooney, 1966, p. 14) and expressed a desire for the show to benefit children of the middle class as well (p. 42–43). The feasibility study was formative to the design and goals of what would become *Sesame Street*, Cooney's construction of the "disadvantaged child" was consistent with the rhetoric at the time and heavily emphasized the improvement of "cognitive development" (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Harrington, 1963; Lewis, 1961).

Cooney's report led to two conferences regarding the initial planning of Children's Television Workshop (CTW) in 1967,[7] the first of which discussed production, timetable, and budget and the second, research and evaluation. The primacy of organizational factors before extensive discussion of the *purpose* of the program reflects the problematic top-down creation of such initiatives in "social venture capital." By the second conference, the architects of *Sesame Street* had established a primary goal of increasing cognitive development, which "meant it would be considerably easier to measure its effects" compared to a central affective outcome (Polsky et al., 1974). While the curricular goals ventured outside of cognitive development over the planning of the first season, Polsky (1974) notes that "they never allowed themselves to lose sight of the central objective" (p. 103).

The Ford Foundation

According to Engleman (1996), in the 1950s the Ford Foundation was financing research on television in schools and financing efforts that resulted in the 1952 FCC reservation of 242 noncommercial channels. The last of their explicit programs in noncommercial television was the 1966 creation of, and ten-million-dollar donation to, the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, "designed to be an innovative and controversial national television magazine covering public

affairs and the arts" (Engelman, 1996, p. 151). The program was known for having difficulties in management, controversy, public opinion, and press; it's possible that the "radicalism" that became of the program deterred the foundation by demonstrating that noncommercial TV could "go beyond the confines of its establishment sponsors" (Engelman, 1996, p. 154). In other words, the Ford Foundation was well-positioned to hold mass control of the media through its ability to be assigned noncommercial channels through the government but extinguished their programs altogether due to their dislike of the politics that became featured on these shows.

Luckily for the Ford Foundation's sticky situation with a political affairs show that had seemed to have gone off the rails, Pifer's leadership of the Carnegie Corporation was known for an increased collaboration with that of Ford and Rockefeller. Despite Ford's initial hesitancy to join another venture in television, the foundation decided to commit initial funds to the budding project. Davidson (as quoted in Polsky et al., 1974), a former secretary of the Children's Television Workshop, noted that the Ford Foundation may have concluded that the nature of PBL was "automatically controversial in a way that a '*Sesame Street*' never will be'' given the seemingly apolitical agenda of early childhood education (p. 53). Therefore, this strategic shift in focus for educational television to the early years retained the strong influence of the private foundations but made the project more politically appealing toward the American public.

The success of Children's Television Workshop (CTW) was only possible through an early and strategic partnership with National Educational Television (NET)—specifically, one with terms that financially benefitted the Carnegie Corporation through lowering costs, while retaining total ownership of all content created and educational curricula. Morrisett learned from PBL's apparently difficult relationship between The Ford Foundation and NET president, John White (Engelman, 1996), and handled initial partnership terms himself (Polsky et al., 1974). In the final terms of agreement, NET would coordinate with the local stations to air both *Sesame Street* and CTW's other initial show, *The Electric Company*. The legal department of CTW would be handled by NET, but *Sesame Street* would retain all rights to their content. On the relationship to NET, Cooney explained that reporting to White rather than the trustees was "the primary error that PBL made" (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 54). The terms of this initial agreement with NET had two important implications. First, *Sesame Street* would have the autonomy to eventually part with its public ties, as it did through the recent move to HBO Max. Second, *Sesame Street* would gain some autonomy from the Board of Trustees, who provided partial funding but were not directly managing the direction of the show.

Gerry Lesser, Chairmanship of CTW's Board of Advisers and Consultants

In 1968, Gerry Lesser joined CTW as chairman of its Board of Advisers and Consultants; his involvement in the project may have contributed to the continued specialized interest of the Harvard Graduate School of Education in early childhood education today. Hired along with Head Researcher Palmer and Executive Producer Connell, the three ensured that "the priorities, the chain of command, and the budget had all been determined" and all that was "required of the staff was the creation of a television series that achieved pre-established goals" (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 103). Lesser was the lead author in a 1965 study that studied how class and "cultural groups," which were defined as "Chinese, Jewish, Negro, and Puerto Rican," relate to patterns in "mental abilities" (p. 6). The study suggested natural selection or environmental factors as influences children's intelligence across groups, an implication which is easily traced back to social Darwinism and the

eugenics movement. Lesser's perspectives on the cognitive development of the "disadvantaged child" would shape the show through his leadership in a series of five curriculum seminars in preparation for season one.

The topics of these seminars, created before inviting outside stakeholders, heavily emphasized cognitive learning outcomes[8] (Fisch & Truglio, 2014). In his book, Lesser (1974) recounts that he gave a "utilitarian view of education" during these seminars focusing on how "basic intellectual skills … have broad currency in our society" (p. 48). Lesser describes the goals of the seminars as "extracting" expert opinion as well as exposing the production team and experts to each other (p. 139). His hope was that this seemingly-early involvement of academics would give scholars "a sense of ownership" of the show so that they might be "less likely to criticize the show once it began" (p. 139).

In recounting the curriculum seminars, Ogilvie (as quoted in Polsky et al., 1974) notes that Lesser and White generally steered the group away from defining the term "disadvantaged child," as they believed a construction or model of this term was a "waste of time" that would ultimately disregard the variation across children (p. 75); instead, they asked the group to generally imagine an average four-year-old. Some academics, such as Chester Pierce, showed concern that the show had lost perspective on its target audience and argued that the show must reflect "what it was like to be a kid in the inner city, what kind of horrors they lived with and the dangers of life and the dim prospects of ever emerging from it" (Davis, 2008, p. 141). Lesser's heated response rejected this concern entirely, later commenting that "the show that was building in my mind was absolutely horrible," what Pierce described seemed "hopeless and awful" (Davis, 2008, p. 142). Other "experts" criticized the show for "illuminating the 'destructive fantasies in the child'" (Davis, 2008, p. 141) and Connell described the seminars as an overall "horrendous strain, physically and mentally" (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 76).

The product of these seminars was "The Instructional Goals of the CTW" (CTW, 1968), which emphasized the educational objectives towards the improvement of "cognitive processes" and identified the Educational Testing Service as the evaluator of the project. The report strongly resembled the recommendations for a potential program outlined in Cooney's feasibility study with an interesting addition of social learning outcomes, including "rules which insure justice and fair play" (CTW, 1968, p. 12). Contradictorily, these learning outcomes both aimed for children to "behave according to the constraints of simple rules" as well as show evidence of "evaluating" and "generating rules," including an ability to distinguish "whether a particular form of praise or punishment is or is not appropriate" (p. 12). It is unclear whether these outcomes hinted towards civil rights advocacy in the context of the decade's televised violence against minorities, but this language might have served as a "crack" in the blockade of the show's cognitive focus, which allowed more direct engagement with social and systemic justice in the decades following.

Robert Stone, Head Writer

Stone kept the "disadvantaged child" in mind in choosing both the setting and title for the show. Cooney, keeping the middle-class family in mind, was concerned how they might respond to a setting inspired by the streets of Harlem (Agrelo, 2021). The process of naming the show was parodied in the pitch reel, with one muppet frustratedly exclaiming "why don't we call the show 'Hey Stupid!'" (Agrelo, 2021, n.p.). This comedic line might represent Stone's perspective on the inner-city Black children, whom he understood as needing urgent intervention towards school

readiness that their environments were not providing. Having spent time developing *Captain Kangaroo*, Stone took much inspiration from the project including the integration of puppets and hiring of Jim Henson. The development of characters evolved over time, especially as children increasingly preferred watching the “muppets” over live actors. Initially, Stone wanted the lead of the show, Gordon, to be a Black male holding “responsibility in the community” and the character that would be Mr. Hooper to be “male, Caucasian, and Jewish” to reflect “that time in Bronx sociological history” (Davis, 2008, p. 168). Stone’s approach to the show reflected a concerning deficit perspective on Black children and a problematic portrayal of underrepresented communities, revealing a need for critical examination of the biases ingrained in his creative vision.

***Sesame Street*’s Prospects in 1970**

As several children’s shows began to emerge in the late 1960s, the media generally still regarded TV as a “wasteland” for children’s brains and some referred to the vision for *Sesame Street* as “only wishful thinking” (Gowran, 1969, p. A13). After the first episode aired on November 10th of 1969, under the newly inaugurated President Nixon, *Sesame Street* quickly became a household name. The first season was generally regarded as a grand success, as the media portrayed the show to the public as very effective at producing educational results in young children. Based on a diverse sample of around nine-hundred American preschoolers, the first year evaluation from the Educational Testing Service asserted that the show had a demonstrated ability to “reduce the distinct educational gap that usually separates advantaged and disadvantaged children” (Ball & Bogatz, 1970, pp. 7–8).

Contrary to the continued narrative that early *Sesame Street* evaluations undoubtably established evidence of the show’s effectiveness, Cook et al. (1975) revisit some of the lesser known findings of the original ETS evaluation. Specifically, Cook et al. cite limited evidence of learning gains in some of the ETS tests, although they note the difficulty in establishing causality in the evaluation of mass media programs as well as the positive correlation of viewership with income. Contrary to the touted low-cost of the show’s production per gains, Cook et al. note that “encouragement-and-viewing cost between $100 and $200 per child per year;” the distribution cost of edutainment initiatives fluctuates based on contextual factors and remains cheaper than providing preschool, yet such hidden costs might challenge the show’s common return-on-investment claims (p. 20). For the “less positive findings,” Cook et al. suggest evidence that the show may have decreased “disadvantage parents reported reading to their children,” and claims that the low Black viewership of the show suggests that “‘*Sesame Street*’ is probably increasing achievement gaps in those domains where it effectively teaches” (p. 20). Cook et al. are skeptical as to whether the target population was served, as they note the show is “selectively used” by advantaged children and emphasizes “the difficulty of pursuing compensatory goals by means of a universalist strategy” (p. 22).

Sesame Street was designed to be positively evaluated, focusing on abstract “cognitive development” and prioritizing an appeal to the white middle-class regardless of its intended audience. As the architects of *Sesame Street* viewed their role as bridging “philanthropy and venture capital,” their approach to curriculum planning blended models of efficiency in business (General Motors Corporation, 1946) with the curricular planning of Tylerism. In relation to *Sesame Street*’s early approach to curriculum formation, Fisch and Truglio (2014) claim that CTW was

inspired by a 1967 AERA monograph authored by Tyler, Gange, and Scriven. Specifically, ETS encouraged Cooney and Morrisett to strike a balance between what Scriven (1967) termed "formative research" and "summative evaluation," encouraging Cooney's commitment to "strong in-house" research. *Sesame Street* was undoubtedly committed to rigorous research processes but ignores Tyler's (2017/1949) recommendation of "a comprehensive philosophy of education" to guide the "value judgements" in forming objectives (p. 74). As Finberg (1990) emphasized the authority of the board of trustees in grantmaking, the guiding values behind *Sesame Street*, particularly as they concerned the "disadvantaged child" as they related to school readiness, were primarily established in the initial funding discussions. The architects commitment to "scientific" curriculum planning selectively engaged with research in education within the power dynamics of a private foundation; an apparent hybrid version of "progressivism" resulted in a social efficiency that, as Kliebard (2004) had noted of the 1940s, "appeared to blend smoothly with the claims of the developmentalists that the curriculum ought to meet the common and individual needs of children and youth" (pp. 183–184).

Despite Cooney's earlier concerns, the show most appealed to the white middle-class; still, the first season was not without controversy. Conservative groups encouraged the program to emphasize family values, and the first season was initially banned in Mississippi for showing Black and white children playing together (Davis, 2008). In 1970, Tony Brown (as cited in Sommariva, 2016), serving as the Chairman of the National Association of Black Media Producers, stated that if the intended audience of *Sesame Street* is "Black people and other minorities who need this type of program desperately, we feel you have missed badly," further criticizing the lack of Black people in positions of power for the show (p. 67). Similar criticisms came from Hispanic activists (Davis, 2008) and feminist organizations (Mandel, 2006) regarding explicit discussion of gender and race. While Nixon praised *Sesame Street* (Davis, 2008), his 1970 commitment of two million dollars was about half of previous government contributions (*New York Amsterdam News*, 1970). Morrisett's name apparently appeared on Nixon's infamous blacklist, although it is unclear whether this referred to him or a family member (Mitgang, 2000). The Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation began to pull funding as early as the 1970s, and the future longevity of the program was uncertain.

Remembering the "Disadvantaged Child"

Jackson (2014) understands cognitive development in relation to the thinly veiled Blackness of the "disadvantaged child," as part of the "'science is apolitical' merry-go round" that "worryingly echoes eugenic categories" by ascribing a fixity of pre-black or pre-known risk (p. 205). In his view, *Sesame Street* represents an elitist "dream that children's television could end social conflict" with "a quick and cheap fix" that, in light of Cook et al.'s (1975) criticism of the initial evaluation, might have provided little educational value to low-income children (p. 205). I previously considered Sesame Workshop's curriculum production within Arstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation (Weinberg, 2020), identifying their formative research efforts with target populations as a type of "tokenism" in which "inequalities of power" manifest "coerced or limited" participation at best (p. 26). The narrative history confirms this dynamic within the formative years of the show, in which an approach to racial inequalities sought to retain white-middle class appeal that demonstrably failed to "[believe] deeply in the intellectual capability" of low-income children or their families (Ladson-Billings, 2012, p. 118).

The curriculum of the first season in some ways weaponized a feel-good multiculturalism, appealing to both Black pride and white sympathy, to frame racial justice as a "emotional restructuring" foreshadowing the emergence of "colorblind" racism that overlooks historical or material realities (Sommariva, 2016, p. 215). Drawing upon a rhetoric of accommodation or "uplift," the architects instead "located in the inability of the subaltern group," being Black Americans, "to practice responsible and rational behaviors," such as providing nurturing environments for young children (Dutta, 2006, p. 224). In a 2019 Smithsonian feature entitled "The Unmistakable Black Roots of '*Sesame Street*,'" Chester Pierce claims a role in developing the "hidden curriculum" designed to "build up the self-worth of black children through the presentation of positive black images" (Greene, 2019, para. 4). Pierce, having previously stirred Lesser in the curriculum seminars, describes how the show drew upon the culture of the historically Black community of Harlem through setting, featuring prominent figures, and music (Greene, 2019). In season one, Black characters on the show would in some ways reinforce racial stereotypes, as some argue of the Roosevelt Franklin muppet (Davis, 2008; Morrow, 2006), as well as subvert the stereotypes of "Harrington's 'other Americans'" by depicting Black adults in a "dependable and responsible family unit" (Mandel, 2006, p. 10).

We might perhaps remember the architects of *Sesame Street*'s construction of the "disadvantaged child" as paradoxically perpetuating American ethnocentrism while at the same time moving towards/away from multiculturalism. In viewing the "Black roots" of the show as a paradox, we might find "a fascinating window into how different societies are seeking to address diversity and build intergroup tolerance" (Gardner, 2021, n.p.) or perhaps even a "a reminder of the long-awaited, unfinished goal" of King's "beloved community" (Mandel, 2006, p. 4). Such exploration of contradiction has a renewed relevance in relation to *Sesame Street*'s recent efforts towards racial justice, responding to the Black Lives Matter movement (Sesame Workshop, 2020).

The Biopolitics of Preschool

Given the context of what (Pinar et al., 1995) describes as "rapid and pervasive curriculum change" (p. 165), Jackson (2014) asserts that "the edutainment pioneered by *Sesame Street* was another purported fix that emerged during the 1960s as a solution to social conflict" (p. 191). Yet edutainment, and Sesame Workshop specifically, continues to thrive in an international scope, an industry that often "emphasizes questions of effectiveness" rather than the "ideologies and values that drive E-E campaigns" (Dutta, 2006, p. 221). The pervasiveness of cognitive development in the show might attest to what Millei and Joronen (2016) refer to as the "(bio)politicization of neuroscience" (p. 2), as the creation and funding of *Sesame Street* constructed the child's brain as valuable as society's "human capital."

The biopolitics of "cognitive development" serve the elite in society well, as solutions to inequalities lie within philanthropic innovations rather than related to struggles of power. By 1970, *Sesame Street* had spent ~$8.2 million dollars, half of which were federal funds, from 1968–70 to create 130, 1-hour episodes (Polsky et al., 1974; see Appendix B for budget). The Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation began to pull funding as early as the 1970s, reflecting their shared view that "social venture capital" was meant to "start new things" rather than sustain "one project forever" (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 111). Thus, the state of *Sesame Street* funding was a sort of "paradox" in which the show "had been judged a great educational and entertainment [success]," yet had diminishing prospects for future funding (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 109).

In 1972, the Ford Foundation gave *Sesame Street* a six million dollar terminal pledge, designed to sustain the program through an investment in a variety of commercial ventures (Polsky, 1974, p. 110). As these foundations gradually pulled funding from the massive budget that they designed, the "'non-profit' and educational goals" of the show became increasingly "separated from its commercial goals" (Jensen & Lustyik, 2017, p. 104). In addition to Sesame Workshop's global edutainment empire, related commercial ventures, and licensing of characters, they also have a line of theme parks, Sesame Place Philadelphia which has been in operation since 1980 and Sesame Place San Diego which opened in 2013; both of these parks are under the operation of SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment (Concepcion, 2021). The "latest but not last strategy" (Jensen & Lustyik, 2017, p. 104) in the show's survival is the re-branding to a "public-private partnership" with HBO Max. It seems that the show still airs publicly through public television and online outlets; however, new episodes are restricted to HBO Max subscribers, putting into question *which* children represent the target population today.

Sesame Street, in a time of rapid socio-political and technological change, contributed to the growing global neoliberal regime in which sovereignty was shared between the state and the private sector (Baez, 2005) and a subsequent dispersion of responsibility (Unterhalter, 2017). The idea of accountability, as constructed by the wealthy, related only to a "best effort" towards apolitical science rather than directly answering to the population to be "served." In the neoliberal regime, *Sesame Street* was part of a larger trend of evaluating programs rather than children themselves (Jackson, 2014). Such focus on program evaluation combined with dwindling prospects for funding often discourages the publication of less desirable outcomes or lessons learned and results in "little flexibility for the communication professionals and NGOs to consider process or participation of the beneficiaries" (Govender, 2013, p. 25).

Remembering the Conditions of Possibility

Our collective memory of *Sesame Street* as a victory in education reform forgets the "shadow" of Head Start, the forgotten possibility of significantly expanding federal investments in public preschool. Head Start represents a "shadow" or "condition of possibility" ultimately overcast by the quick fix of edutainment within the education "innovation" cycle (Dussel, 2009, p. 185). According to Zigler, one of the architects of head start, in a HEW meeting (in Zigler & Styfco, 2010), "many participants were enamored with the TV program *Sesame Street* and dwelled on the fact that it was so inexpensive;" it wasn't long before he was asked to "fund *Sesame Street* out of the Head Start budget" (p. 141). When *Sesame Street* was granted a portion of the Head Start funds, however, the Office of Child Development "demanded a clear pledge that the show's producers would direct the program to a poor and minority audience" rather than a larger audience (Morrow, 2006, p. 60).

In Cooney's feasibility study, she described the Head Start program as unrealistic and expensive to justify *Sesame Street* as a "cost-effective" alternative. The counter-argument to this is eloquently explained by economist James Heckman (as quoted in Strauss, 2015),[9] who, when asked about edutainment responded, "promoting school readiness and fostering productive skills isn't simply planting children in front of the television or tablet" (para. 17). Not only did *Sesame Street* directly take funds away from the Head Start budget, but it also overshadowed the budding program through a mad flash of media attention; as a result, *Sesame Street*'s indirect costs to Head

Start might have included a dulling of public interest, redirection of federal and private funds, and a rare opportunity within what would be known as "the preschool moment."

Final Thoughts: What Will We Remember?

In some ways, *Sesame Street* was one of the many "wide pendulum swings" of curriculum fashions; the edutainment industry might represent a shifting position in the curricular "stream with several currents" while also having its own complex and dynamic trends internally (Kliebard, 2004, p. 174). Now in production for over 50 years, the show continues to have grand visions, significant influence internationally, and a colossal budget. Too much has changed over the years to attempt to recount here, but the underlying structure of the curriculum remains within the capitalist schema of "design, implement, and evaluate," often under the guidance of child psychology experts.[10] The question is not whether *Sesame Street*, or even edutainment, should continue on; rather, my purpose of exploring its historical origins is to prompt a discussion regarding what role edutainment should play going forward. To reiterate my earlier point, edutainment likely will, and already has to an extent, arise as a cost-effective solution to the global "crisis of learning" during the pandemic.

On a final note, I hope that my liberal colleagues approach the possibilities of edutainment without recreating the unproductive and tense dynamics of "experts" and "creators." We must approach such conversations with an open mind and creativity, acknowledging the ways in which the aesthetic aspects of the curriculum have historically cultivated joy, connection, and a love of learning. While I discussed various models of participatory edutainment in my dissertation, there are infinite other ways forward in the edutainment industries regarding their form, intentions, organizational structures, and curriculum. Specifically, when edutainment arises again as "the next big thing" whether it be through television, video games, mobile apps, toys, or the "metaverse,"[11] how will we who are perceived as experts in education, respond? Will we be divided as either enchanted or oppositional, or will we spark conversations that subvert innovations as "cure" through historical context and encourage such initiatives, stakeholders, and policymakers to "make new mistakes"?

Notes

1. The *Sesame Stree*t funding credits listed on the Fandom website are not verified by Sesame Workshop, PBS, or any associated entity. However, the funding timeline was generally consistent with literature included in the current analysis (including Davis, 2008; Jensen & Lustyik, 2017; Polsky et al., 1974).
2. *A Note on Cancel Culture:* My purpose in analyzing the processes of private funding in global edutainment, especially as they relate to issues regarding race and education, is not towards a reactionary "canceling" of *Sesame Street*. Rather, my purpose is to place debates surrounding the show and the wider industry of edutainment into historical context in hopes of what de Oliveira Andeotti (2016) terms opening up "possibilities for new mistakes to be made" (p. 326).
3. In 1910, Carnegie gave an initial donation of ten million dollars to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He also founded the Church Peace Union in 1914, which later became known as the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.
4. His namesake is remembered by such philanthropic efforts as the Carnegie library, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Institution for Science, Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, Carnegie Hero Fund, Carnegie Mellon University, and Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh.

5. Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation in the formative years of *Sesame Street* included Carnegie's only child, Margaret Carnegie Miller, whose involvement with the foundation is unclear; other trustees (see Appendix A) included a nuclear physicist involved in the Manhattan Project, a member of the infamous Ames family, a high-ranking United Nations representative, and several prominent New York lawyers and businessmen (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, n.d.-a).

6. In relation to the capitalization of the words "Black" and "White" to describe racial categories, I understand that these already limiting definitions of the complex ways in which individuals are racialized in different historical and geographic circumstances require intentionality in their use. While "Black" is capitalized throughout this analysis, I have chosen not to capitalize "white" in several instances for both pragmatic and theoretical reasons. On a practical level, one of the central figures in the history of *Sesame Street* that I discuss has the last name "White," and distinguishing the racial terminology from the person in lowercase assists with the following of this discussion. Second, I am informed by the position of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) (2020), an organization that recommends the capitalization of "White" to emphasize that White individuals are also subject to racialization, rather than the absence of race. However, I make the critical distinction that "white" be lowercased in relation to systems of white supremacy, many of which relate to the current paper. As a White woman in academia, I am committed to continually reflecting and being accountable to my linguistic practices as they relate to systems of oppression and my own positionality to each specific project.

7. Both of which Howe, Hausman, Morrisett, Finberg, and Cooney attended.

8. The five topics included: Social, Moral, and Affective Development; Language and Reading; Mathematical and Numerical Skills; Reasoning and Problem-Solving; and Perception.

9. For further context on Heckman as he relates to early childhood education, see pages 20–21 of my University College London dissertation (Weinberg, 2020).

10. The field of child psychology has also changed much over the years, increasingly crossing into the disciplines of sociology, health, education, and social work.

11. This term has recently been touted as the "word of the year," originating with Zuckerberg's vision for an embodied online experience and integrated internet.

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Appendix A

Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation in the formative years of Sesame Street (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, n.d.-a)

Name	Start	End	
Margaret Carnegie Miller	1934	1973	Lifetime Trustee, daughter of Andrew Carnegie
Devereux Colt Josephs	1944	1966	
Morris Hadley	1947	1967	
Gwilyn A. Price	1953	1967	
Charles M. Spofford	1953	1973	
John W. Gardner	1955	1967	Foundation President 1955-1967
Robert F Bacher	1959	1976	
Malcolm Ames MacIntyre	1959	1976	
Fredrick M. Eaton	1962	1969	
David A. Shepard	1962	1975	
James A. Perkins			
Walter B. Wriston	1964	1972	
Amyas Ames	1965	1975	
Alan Pifer	1965	1982	Foundation President from 1967-1982
Harding F. Bancroft	1966	1978	
Frederick B. Adams	1967	1971	
Louis W. Cabot	1967	1978	
Aiken W. Fisher	1967	1977	

Appendix B

"Funding of Children's Television Workshop 1968-1970" (Polsky et al., 1974, p. 114)

Department of Health, Education and Welfare	**Dollar Amount**	**Percent of Total**
Office of Education	$3,325,000	40.6
Office of Economic Opportunity	650,000	7.9
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development	15,000	0.2
National Endowment for the Humanities	10,000	0.1
	$4,000,000	48.8
Other Funding		
Carnegie Corporation	$1,500,000	18.3
Ford Foundation	1,538,000	18.7
Corporation for Public Broadcasting (cash and interconnection)	625,900	7.6
Learning Resources Institute	150,000	1.8
John and Mary R. Markle Foundation	250,000	3.1
Miscellaneous contributions	51,700	0.7
Other income	67,200	0.9
Interest (banks and commercial papers) and other income	8,900	0.1
Total Funds	$8,191,700	100.0

*Children's Television Workshop, statement of income and carryover for the two years and three months ended June 27, 1970, memo, March 29, 1971, CTW archives.