

Playing *with* the Music: Ecologies of Attention and  
Understanding in the Classical Music Education  
Project of *Sesame Street*

*or*

The Bird, the Worm, and the Mushroom:  
Three Stories of Listening

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## Introduction

If I have done anything right this paper should be easy to read. I think that is the kindest thing a writer can do. If I have done anything right this paper should also not be quite like anything you have seen before. I might say that is the second kindest thing a writer can do.

In the spirit of easy reading, here's a summary of what lies ahead:

This is a paper about the ecologies of attention and understanding evident in and emergent from the presentation of classical music on the classic children's television program *Sesame Street*. The paper takes two parts. The first part is an analysis of context, attention, and education on the program, framed through the analogy of bird-watching. I argue that the classical music education which is presented on the program deviates from the humanitarian norm of "uplift" and absolute aesthetics—the bird's-eye view—and instead presents an understanding of music which resonates with ideas of "listening with"—the view of the bird watcher, or in the words of Jenny Odell, the bird *listener* who observes and is observed; who through acts of attention learns to perceive the world around them pluralistically. If the "birds eye view" portends objective and distant observation, the bird watcher, conversely, acknowledges their interconnected participation in, and co-mutual observation with, the elements of the system that they are observing. The bird listener is too a part of the ecosystem, and understands that the birds they are watching are also watching them.

In this section I argue that while *Sesame Street* engages with aspects of critical pedagogy, it is ultimately resistant to educational classifications. The program is itself *ecological*, composed of many interacting and competing parts which create a program whose character is emergent and consistent, but not unified.

Part two is an analysis of classical music performance on the program, framed through the analogy of the worm-listener—they who listen as outsiders to the arcane sound of the world beneath our feet. The worm listener encapsulates the dynamic between and aerial

listener and a subterranean listener encountering each other and their sensory worlds. The worm listener listens across boundaries be they physical, such as the boundary between the air and the ground, or social, such as boundaries of class, ability, or genera. This section deals with questions of parody, virtuosity, childhood, and disability. It is composed of character studies of Yo-Yo Ma and Evelyn Glennie, as they appear on the program.

Here, I introduce Leonard Bernstein's dichotomy of education vs. pedagogy, that is, "acquainting people with new stuff they can come to love... rather than having to memorize the conjugation of an irregular verb."<sup>1</sup> I use this definition of education to contrast with the view of Classical music as uplift and analyze how this dichotomy plays out on *Sesame Street*.

In this section I argue that *Sesame Street* takes part in a long tradition of classical music parody which welcomes the outsider while at the same time engages the classical music native and initiate—that is, the worm, who has spent its life embedded in the classical strata. *Sesame Street* neither challenges nor exalts the classical music canon, but rather serves as an enabling technology, a *geophone*, which allows for the aerial listener to perceive and engage with the arcane sounds of underworld.

Each part of the paper begins with a prologue—or dare I say, a dramatic monologue—written in first-person perspective which grounds the following discussion. If the chapters look at musical and educational ecologies, the prologues give lived context for the geological bedrock on which these ecologies are based. The paper ends, as it begins, with a final prologue. This final section compares experiencing the internet to mushroom hunting, and looks at recent media changes to *Sesame Street* street consumption.

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1. Alicia Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People's Concerts* (Lanham: Rowman / Littlefield, 2015), 71.

## Prologue to Part I : In *media res*

On a summer evening in Saint Louis I was listening to the radio in the kitchen. In the research for this paper, which had grown from a character study on Yo-Yo Ma to encompass the themes of education and public broadcasting, I had decided that I should actually own some kind of broadcast receiver. After looking into mini televisions, I settled on the conservative option of a radio. As I chopped onions, my local NPR station's weekend programming buzzed in the background.

A program on the recent events in Afghanistan had ended and the PSA space, where a commercial station would have run ads, began. I heard a woman's voice say "This is Saint Louis Public Radio. Understanding Starts Here."

My ears perked up. What an intriguing declaration. It is not "This is Saint Louis Public Radio, your source of news," or "This is Saint Louis Public Radio: hear the nation." Instead, the slogan is a promise to increase your *understanding*. NPR is offering not just to inform you, but moreover to provide some kind of ethical education, presumably into cultural-socio-political events such that one comes away *understanding*.

A strange word, "understanding." In the context of the socio-political, cultural and economic topics under the purview of national public radio, something seems very kind about the word. It feels emotionally laden and steeped in empathy.

Its usage does not imply factual understanding, something like "Let us factually explain what's going on in Afghanistan," but rather, "cultivate an understanding of the human experiences of Afghanistan along with us."

Etymologically, the "under" in the first half of the word "understand" does not denote the more modern "below," but rather among or in-between.<sup>2</sup> To understand is to stand among. What NPR is offering, then, is empathy in a broadcast.

This offering of empathy continues the founding ethos of NPR and its focus on hearing voices from the general public. *All Things Considered*, now one of the most listened-to

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2. "understand (v.)," accessed October 31, 2021, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/understand>.

programs on American radio, debuted with the chaotic coverage of what at the time was the biggest anti-Vietnam war protest to date. It consisted of tape gathered by multiple reporters at the event with no overarching narrative. It was unlike anything on the radio at the time. Its chaos was intended to capture the chaos of the moment, but was also part of a larger aesthetic and political trend on the program to hear the voices of normal Americans. While this has never been the exclusive, or even most prevalent, style of production for public radio, it has become known as the “public radio sound” because of its distinct, recognizable, texture and origin on NPR.

This sound was pioneered by the “founding mother” of NPR, radio journalist Susan Stamberg. She was inspired by the cinema verité of the time, saying that the idea “was to tell a story without telling it— just sound through chunks.” This meant no authoritative radio voice, but instead just giving everyday Americans time to talk before moving along to another speaker. The work of narrative interpretation is left to the listener, who is given a more rhizomatic view of the events— a radical new direction in radio journalism and broadcast culture more generally. One particular aspect of the public radio sound was the use of “cross talk,” a technique in which two voices are layered onto one another in polyphony, which was inspired by Glenn Gould’s “contrapuntal storytelling” in *The Solitude Trilogy*.<sup>3</sup> Stamberg retrospectively described the debut as having “no interfering narrator.”<sup>4</sup>

This “interfering narrator” is codified in the “Radio Diaries DIY Handbook,” created by Joe Richman and his independent radio production company Radio Diaries, perhaps the most exemplary modern example of the public radio sound. In the forward by radio producer Jay Allison writes that “reported stories, no matter how great they are, insert the reporter’s sensibility and style into the narrative. When outside narrators tell the stories, you feel their contexts in their voices. Along with the story, you notice the podium from

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3. Jeff Porter, *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 197.

4. Porter, 185.

which it is told. Listen to any vintage reporter piece to hear what I mean. Un-narrated pieces, on the other hand, arise from their sources and become a kind of time capsule of human experience, capturing an undiluted essence, feeling real.” The handbook gives instruction on how to create “unnarrated” audio stories, and centers this style within an ethos of radio for the common good. Allison continues that “it’s worth noting that this book, and the work of Radio Diaries, sprang from public radio. It was created in the context of a mission, a public service, a common goal of civic good. This is important. It keeps the work from being selfish, or from merely seeking financial gain or popularity. It creates a community of work so that, taken together, all the stories we make in public radio can affect the tone of civic life.”<sup>5</sup> Allison is arguing here that not only do stories without central narrators give a truer representation of the events, unimpeded and uncolored by the intermediary authority of the narrator, but this platforming of individuals from outside of journalism is essential to the health of public discourse, something with which Susan Stamberg would likely agree.

The showcasing of alternative voices was so central to the ethos of a young NPR that the network turned down a \$300,000 donation from the Ford Foundation contingent on the network hiring well-known broadcast journalist Edward P. Morgan as host of *All Things Considered*. Morgan, recipient of a Peabody Award, would have certainly brought the new network credibility, but NPR feared that the authoritative voice would get in the way of the alternative voices that they wanted to showcase. The ethos of “standing among” seems to be baked in to the entire project of public radio.

This ethos is visible in public television—*Sesame Street* media and institutional habitat—as well. In the mid-1960s Ralph Lowell, Board Chairman of the Boston Educational Television station proposed that the Oval Office put together a commission on educational television. President Johnson, believing that this was a job for the private sector, turned to the Carnegie Corporation. What was formed was a diverse team known as the Carnegie

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5. Joe Richman, *Radio Diaries DIY Handbook* (2017), accessed July 9, 2022, <http://radiohandbook.org/>.

Commission on Educational Television. Among others, this team included writer Ralph Ellison, concert pianist Rudolph Serkin, and labor leader Leonard Woodcock.<sup>6</sup>

The commission put together a report titled *Public Television, A Program for Action* which stressed the artistic and transformative value of the medium and the importance of using it to resist the pressure toward uniformity found in commercial television but instead seek out and satisfy the needs of the nation's diversity.<sup>7</sup>

The need for this shift in broadcasting came about because the United States Government had granted access to the airwaves to commercial stations first, only adding public stations to the media landscape as part of Great Society era reformations. Canada and England, on the other hand, created public broadcasting first and only later opened the airwaves to commercial stations.<sup>8</sup>

It was this same era of reform that lead the Carnegie Corporation in search of a way to increase the reach of their humanitarian educational programs for inner-city preschoolers.<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Morrisett, the vice president of programs at the Carnegie Corporation<sup>10</sup> and a psychologist<sup>11</sup> had noticed his own daughter's fascination with the television medium when his three-year old got up early in the morning to watch the pre-broadcast RCA test patterns.<sup>12</sup>

Morrisett then tasked Joan Ganz Cooney, a publicity specialist for the *United States Steel Hour*, a twice-monthly series on CBS,<sup>13</sup> with the project of producing a study on the educational possibilities of children's television, backed by a \$15,000 grant. The resulting report, *The Potential Uses of Television in Children's Education* analyzed the ways that the relatively new technology of television could be used as an educational supplement for preschoolers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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6. John Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," *The Review of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968): 409.

7. Meany, 410.

8. Meany, 412.

9. Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Viking, 2008), 15.

10. Jans Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 1966, 7.

11. Davis, *Street Gang*, 15.

12. Davis, 11.

13. Davis, 27.

It was this report which lead to the creation of the program at hand, *Sesame Street*.



# Part I

The Bird-Watcher:  
Attention, Education, and Entertainment

## Entertainment: Welcome to *Sesame Street*

*Sesame Street* needs little introduction. One of the longest running shows in the history of television,<sup>14</sup> it has been a cultural staple of generations of children—and their parents—in the United States and worldwide.

While *Sesame Street* is an educational program, it is notable for its entertainment value. This stems from the realization by the original producers of the program that in order to compete with the non-educational television competition only a turn of the dial away, televised preschool education would have to be just as entertaining.<sup>15</sup> This is especially true given that at the program's premiere in 1969, there was nothing like it in the children's media landscape.<sup>16</sup> This means that there were truly no models for the production of the program, nor for its reception—they could not trust that children knew how to watch educational programs.

This realization led to a fundamental characteristic of the production structure of the program: rather than hire child development and education specialists to produce the show, they used education research to inform decisions made by seasoned TV, radio, and Broadway producers, writers, composers, and actors. This decision was informed by the observation that children respond well to adult television and were known to recite ads for beer and cigarettes, as well as having their attention held by adult variety shows such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*.<sup>17</sup>

But *Sesame Street* is not just entertaining for children. In order to encourage parents to watch the show along with their children, a move which would also help keep preschoolers focused, the producers aimed to make the show entertaining enough for parents to want to watch it along with their children.<sup>18</sup> To this effect, on *Sesame Street* musical per-

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14. "Sesame Street," *Britannica Academic*.

15. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Children's Education," 38.

16. Davis, *Street Gang*, See chapter 3 for a survey of the contemporary children's television landscape.

17. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 16.

18. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "Sesame Street as a Musical Comedy-Variety Show," in *Music in Comedy Television: Notes on Laughs*, ed. Liz Giuffre and Philip Hayward (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017), 294; Mixed-

formers that parents would know are featured, often playing educational parodies of their own work. For example, Norah Jones' performance on *Sesame Street* in 2004.<sup>19</sup> Sitting at the piano with Elmo, Jones re-spins "I Don't Know Why," a somber song of heartbreak and alcoholism, as "I Don't Know Y," in which she laments all of the words she can no longer spell, now that her friend, the letter Y, has stood her up for a play date. Jones' performance and delivery are nearly identical to those which appear on her recording of the original for her album *Come Away With Me*. This is "quality" music for adults which has been modified to fit the highly specific musical demonstration which is needed for the *Sesame Street* educational project.

## Listening *with*: Attention as Grounds for Ethics

The ethos of music on *Sesame Street* was perhaps best summarized by Joe Rapso, the first music director of the program, in a 1971 press release. The program's diverse music, he said, would help bridge cultural divides when the kids were grown up and "bring all kids together, whether they live in Grosse Point or on 148th Street in the Bronx... And the beauty of our music is maybe that the child in the Grosse Pointe home is hearing gospel and blues for the first time and the black child in the urban ghetto is hearing a harpsichord and flute for the first time. Someday, when they grow up, they'll have one more thing in common."<sup>20</sup>

Rapso's belief in the power of music is idealistic and his assumption that the privileged child has never heard blues or gospel, or is immersed in classical music, is oversimplistic and tinged with classicism, but we see with this statement a clear expression of an ethics of understanding through sonic exposure: By using entertainment to focus

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age television targeting likely began on the television program *Captain Kangaroo*. Davis, *Street Gang*, 46.

19. *Sesame Street: Episode 4081—Rosita dislikes her accent*, May 7, 2004, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goUNpfS\\_Aa0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goUNpfS_Aa0).

20. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," 297.

attention and expose children to music from other social and economic contexts, Rapso is promising not only a musical education, but also an ethical one. Having “one more thing in common” is perhaps here grounds for the social understanding which is historically valued by public media. The “power of music” is an idea which often arises in neoliberal discourses of music and its value. While Rapso’s statement on the power of music to bridge cultural divides shares many of the same language as these neoliberal discourses, I find that the presentation of music on *Sesame Street* diverges from the standard neoliberal narratives of music and music education, which I discuss in the section “Interiority and the limits of understanding.” I understand these neoliberal discourses through Ana Bull’s analysis of their prevalence in the British musical education system in *Class, Control, and Classical Music* and Marianna Ritchey’s analysis of how classical music has been put to the service of capitalism in *Composing Capital*. Whereas the musical narratives discussed in these books emphasize the creation of value by the individual, the ethos of *Sesame Street*, while it displays certain neoliberal aspects, leans strongly toward a more collectivist and humanist ethos of understanding based not in creating value through music, nor even in creating music, but instead based in sonic exposure and practices of listening.

Practices of listening can be understood from a number of fields, most canonically musicology and sound studies. However, I find that sound art and the closely related field of acoustic ecology are particularly illuminating tools for understanding how we listen. In particular, the compositions and frameworks for understanding presented by New Zealand composer Annea Lockwood give shape to forms of listening which are not centered in subject-object relationships. Lockwood is known for her fascination with the transitory nature of natural sounds, particularly those of water and rivers. In the 1960s, Lockwood began a project with the goal of recording and archiving the sound of every river on the planet.<sup>21</sup> These recordings sometimes include the sound of what she calls the “river people,” mixed in. These are the voices of the people who live and work on

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21. Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 117.

the river.<sup>22</sup> Though these interviews come from around the world and Lockwood has primarily been involved with anglophone audiences, these interviews are never translated. Rather than strict semantic meaning, Lockwood prefers to capture what she calls “the rhythm of memory,” or the way that the speed and energy of an oral recollection ebbs and flows as the speaker gropes for a shaky memory.<sup>23</sup>

In 2019 Lockwood selected the theme for World Listening Day, a global project by the World Listening Project, which celebrates acoustic ecology and listening practices every July 18, the birthday of R. Murray Schafer. The theme she selected was “listening with,” which she described as “listening with an awareness that all around you are other life-forms simultaneously listening and sensing with you—plant roots, owls, cicadas, voles—mutually intertwined within the web of vibrations which animate and surround our planet.”<sup>24</sup>

She described in an interview how she came to this mode of listening:

“[I remember] in the little neighborhood of our house and around us in the woods—an alertness. There was a quality of an electric alertness in the air and I suddenly realized I’m not the only one listening. I mean everything around me is listening, you know.

So instead of listening *to* the neighborhood, I was listening *with* the neighborhood. And it’s funny. It’s a change of perspective. It’s as if I was used to having my ears swivel this way and I turned, simply turned, and now they’re swiveling that way and the mode of hearing—the mode of absorbing, brings for me, a strong sense of being totally interwoven with everything else around.”<sup>25</sup>

Throughout this paper I use this phrase “listening *with*” to describe situations and practices of listening and being which engage in this mutual sonic awareness. Along with its variation “playing *with*,” they form the two primary elements of my framework for the analysis of the acoustic ecology of *Sesame Street*.

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22. Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 121.

23. Rodgers, 122.

24. “World Listening Project – About Us,” accessed January 14, 2021, <https://www.worldlisteningproject.org/about-us/>.

25. “World Listening Day 2019 “Listening with is so nourishing”,” accessed January 14, 2021, [https://vimeo.com/342883550?embedded=true&source=vimeo\\_logo&owner=20220901](https://vimeo.com/342883550?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=20220901).

Pauline Oliveros, a contemporary and friend of Lockwood<sup>26</sup> distinguishes *listening* from *hearing*, saying that “to hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.” She defined her practice of “deep listening” as a complete and intense sonic awareness based in observation rather than judgement.<sup>27</sup> “Listening *with*,” then is not “hearing *with*,” that is, not as co-perception, but rather an amorphous and rhizomatic form of co- and meta-awareness and offering of attention.

The social and artistic significance of attention is analyzed by Jenny Odell in *How To Do Nothing*, a book at the intersection of media theory and ecology. Odell places attention at the center of ethics: We decide who is seen, who is heard, and who has agency, through acts of attention.<sup>28</sup> *Sesame Street* is constantly showcasing acts of attention, whether it is a conversation between two Muppets about hurt feelings, or two musicians interacting on the concert stage. Centering attention as an object of study gives access to the practices of listening that *Sesame Street* teaches. I make this shift away from traditional musicological tools of analysis largely because *Sesame Street* is a project which spans multiple generations of artists, producers, and sources of funding, yet has retained its character. It changes more like a forest does than a sonata. *Sesame Street* is an emergent phenomenon, the result of the interactions and conflicts of numerous actors, rather than the vision of a small group of musicians and composers—the scale which current musicological tools privilege.

Odell describes a way of engaging with the world similar to that of bird watching, which she says is better described as bird *listening*. By listening with the birds—listening in a way which acknowledges one's own subjectivity and their location as another sound-

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26. Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 116.

27. Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2019), 33/366, As things stand today, e-books are basically useless for academic research because they lack, of all things, page numbers. At its bare-bones, a synthetic work like this methodology section is just a long list of page numbers, which makes my reading habits slightly unhealthy. I'm going to go back and find the page numbers in the hard cover edition, but for now, I will list them as fractions.

28. Odell, 154.

ing element of the sonic world—the listener learns to differentiate and identify the sounds of the different birds in an environment, and thereby becomes aware of the ecology around them and their place within it.<sup>29</sup> This ecological, attention-based understanding of the world requires that one gives up the idea of discrete entities, simple origin stories, and simple one-to-one causalities, and above all, requires time. The direct product of this attention, Odell says, is context. That is, paying close attention can help us better understand the nuanced ecologies of being and identities that make up the ecological relationships of an environment. The longer that the attention is held, the more context appears.<sup>30</sup>

Bird listening musical behavior takes place in the skits of early Muppet Simon Soundman, who has a phonographically accurate voice and often substitutes nouns for the sounds that they make. In one skit from 1973,<sup>31</sup> Simon visits a music store, where he tells the shopkeeper that he is in the market for a “nice, shiny—” and then we hear a long trumpet lick as his mouth moves in time.

“Uh... Oh... Would you mind repeating that, sir?”

“No, indeed. What I said was I’d like to buy a nice, shiny--”  
and then the trumpet sounds again.

The shopkeeper goes off-screen and returns with an instrument.

“Here you are, sir. A beautiful new violin.”

“No, no, no... I don’t want a--” this time he makes violin  
sounds. “You see, because what I asked for was a nice, shiny--”

And the skit goes on like this with for a number of minutes with the shopkeeper bringing back the wrong instruments and Simon Soundman referring to them only through impeccable renditions of their sound.

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29. Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 33/366.

30. Odell, 155.

31. *Sesame Street: Episode 0458—Nobody believes that Snuffy is real/Another snowy day*, January 24, 1973, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3N5B21EEXQ>.

This skit uses a simple and entertaining gag to expose children to the sounds, names, and appearances of several common instruments. Just as Odell discusses leaning to identify birds by their sounds, children are taught here to learn to identify the sounds of several common instruments that you would find in the environment of music store or a big band—the sound that the shopkeeper himself makes once Simon leaves, saying “that fellow was pretty good. Huh. I should have asked him if he would like to play in our—” and we hear the sounds of a big band. Simon’s shtick is that he substitutes sounds for nouns. This is and especially effective gag when he is discussing instruments, as instruments are known for, in a sense are, their sounds. Knowing what each instrument is requires listening in order for one to engage with it and take part in the play and humor of this skit.

But Rapso’s statement on music and the broader ethos of *Sesame Street* demonstrated through its programming go beyond awareness and context of musical instruments. It is primarily one of social context. To quote pioneering broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, the role of television is to make the world aware of itself.<sup>32</sup> By creating a media platform through which children of different backgrounds can gain exposure to each other’s music, they will have an increased awareness and understanding of each other. Implicit in all this is the idea that this will relieve social and class tensions. The press release where this statement was made was titled “Beetles and Beethoven, Move on Over. The Seventies Sound Is Sesame Street.” Rapso was selling the radical potential of the program and musical sounds, albeit idealistically. With this statement he was selling a social and ethical education based in context and understanding through acts of sonic attention.

This attitude, the social context of listening, is apparent in a number of musical skits on the program.

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32. Davis, *Street Gang*, 49.



## **Case Study 1: Itzhak Perlman and "What's Easy for You is Hard for Me"**

Fading in from black, there is a simple stage set with three folding chairs. On the third to the right is an instrument case. Entering from the bottom of the frame, a girl runs up the big grey steps to the stage and takes a seat to the left, smiling. She looks in the direction she came from. Itzhak Perlman enters with a cane in each hand. He begins to climb the steps to the stage, swinging each stiff leg up to the next level and climbing one step at a time.

There are three big steps, presumably made from grey plywood, and then a small step up to the stage. By the second step, the girl begins to fidget. By the third step her smile has faded and she looks to the side and kick her feet while she waits, perhaps to avoid staring.

Perlman climbs the small remaining distance between the steps and the stage and turns to sit down.

"Ooff. Those steps," he says.

In order to bend at the waist and hips to sit, he unlocks his leg braces with an audible click and a rotation of his hips. He sits down and pulls his hands out of the metal rings of his canes.

"You know," he says, turning to the girl, "some things that are really easy for you are hard for me."

He picks up his violin and checks the tuning with two quick plucks with his fingerboard hand and then a quick bow across each adjacent string pair, eyes closed. His tone is rich and

bright, even when tuning. He launches into an impressive flourish, starting with double stops followed by a long run up and down the fingerboard, ending with a right hand pizzicato chord. He does this all with a certain light effortlessness.

"Yeah, but some things are easy for you that are hard for me," the girl replies. She lifts her violin and plays a melody in a minor key. She carries the tune, but her intonation is unstable. Perlman tilts his head and leans in with appreciation as she plays. They both smile when she finishes.

The view of classical music which we gain access to here is not a traditional one. This is not a performance for an audience, but instead a intimate moment of discourse and vulnerability between two musicians. Here, classical music is not seen from the birds eye view, that of objective distance, looking over the musical landscape, but that of the bird listener listening along with. There is no audience in this skit, nor is there hierarchy, reverence, or authority. There is no criticism nor teaching going on and he is not there to fix or improve her playing. Perlman may be virtuosic, but he is not established as a master guiding his pupils. This skit is not about Perlman as an individual of status, but rather it is about the interaction of the two musicians and how they listen to and acknowledge each other's lived experiences of music and the world.

Of course, their experiences are not equal—being a novice violinist does not have the same implications as being a disabled person. While this skit greatly simplifies what it means to be a disabled person, showing only Perlman's difficulty with the steps, it does not flatten their difficulties to equivalence, nor does it reduce their interaction to dichotomies of ability vs. disability and mastery vs. inexperience. The point here seems to be to normalize disability and to present the girl and Perlman both as multifaceted human beings worthy of being seen and listened to.

We may be watching from home as a television audience, but what we see is not the somber performance of canonic works, nor is it an accessible presentation of a classical music program for non-initiates. What we are watching is a demonstration of ecological musical listening, of listening *with*. One might object that this is *media*, and that what we are seeing is fake, a construction. That is, in fact, the case. However, that does not reduce the potential of an ecological reading of this skit, nor its efficacy as a demonstration. What we are seeing here is a representation of an empathetic and ecological experience and a sandboxed recreation of real life, inasmuch as the producers created an actual experience on the set which we can view the recording of—an experience which speaks to actual, lived, human encounters.

The word “sandboxed” comes from software design, where it is used to describe an isolated or contained area where a program can be run with a limited number of resources, often so it cannot cause damage to or drain resources from the larger system. This term has been taken up by collaborative online communities and their projects, such as Wikipedia, to describe webpages and other spaces where users are free to experiment without risk of damaging actual content.<sup>33</sup> The term is also used to describe a style of educational material where the learner is presented with a place to learn, play, and explore, much like a playground sandbox. The sandboxed space contains materials which are real and pre-existing, just as sand is, but have been curated for educational purposes.

And like sand on a playground is no less real for its context, this skit is no less real for being filmed. Perlman actually limped up the tall steps onto the stage as he had done countless times outside of the *Sesame Street* set—this time was no easier than any other. The girl actually played as she has obviously done for hundreds of hours, and this time was no easier than any other. Though what we at home are seeing is a representation of a social encounter, it is a recreation of actual experiences.

And its sandboxing does not detract from its meaningfulness, but rather, it is only

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33. “sandbox,” accessed January 5, 2022, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/sandbox>.

through this sandboxing that it can be made into entertainment and education such that it can contribute to an ethical education.

I say all of this to argue that an ecological reading and ecological education can come out of “constructed” media, that ultimately, it is not un-reality which is created, but a guided slice of reality, made in order to facilitate the ecological goal of awareness and context.

This next skit similarly features a disabled artist, deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. However, while the Perlman skit called attention to ability and disability and modeled co-awareness and understanding, the following skit chooses not to address disability directly and instead focuses on musical and social listening in the context of a classical music performance.

### **Case Study 2: Glennie and Linda**

Glennie is first introduced by an off-screen voice: “And Now, Evelyn Glennie, world famous percussionist, will perform a duet with her friend Linda.”

Glennie walks in followed by Linda.

“Now, I’ll tell you when to come in. Okay,” Glennie says, signing and speaking simultaneously, and hands Linda a single mallet.”

Glennie launches into an impressive piece of solo classical marimba for four mallets.

At the beginning of an impressive run, Linda taps Glennie’s shoulder.

“Now?” she signs and mouths.

“Not now, not now,” Glennie responds, lifting her mallets.

She continues with the run down from the high end of the Marimba

to the middle. A small hiccup at the end of the phase suggest that she is slightly flustered, but only slightly. She continues on to the next phrase, displacing Linda, who stands by her side watching closely, which each step as she moves up and down the instrument. With a massive run upwards she finishes the phrase and raises her mallets into the air. Linda taps her shoulder.

"Now?"

"Not now," Glennie shakes her head.

Glennie crosses the stage to an assortment of unhitched percussion instruments, including a snare drum and numerous cymbals and other pieces of resonant metal. Glennie plays a very modern sounding solo, impressive in its wash of timbres and coordination. At first Linda plays close attention, but after a few moments she starts to look bored and disappointed, crosses her arms, and lets her head droop.

Glennie plays a roll on the snare and looks at her partner expectantly. Linda is not listening. She tries again. The response is the same. Glennie taps the splash cymbal lightly. She pokes Linda's shoulder. She looks up.

"Now!" Glennie gestures at the cymbal with a large gesture.

Surprised, but excited, Linda raises her mallet and strikes the cymbal. The audience breaks out in applause. The two look at each other with a smile and shake hands.

They walk to the center stage and take a bow, first to the camera-- representing the concert-hall audience--and then to

each other. A girl walks up to them and hands Linda, the amateur, a bouquet of flowers. Glennie watches, miffed. She puts her hands on her hips and with a look of shock and disappointment on her face. Linda, soaking up the applause, smiles, and hands Glennie back her mallet, a gesture much like the lead ballerina pulling a single rose out of her bouquet to hand to her partner. Glennie takes the mallet, and storms off the stage, frowning. Linda turns back to camera and smiles.

Whereas the first skit centered on ability and disability, this skit does not present the two deaf performers as encountering any difficulty, not including interpersonal relationships. This is, in fact, where the humor of this skit comes from: their inability to get onto the same page due to competing egos, and their resultant misunderstanding of the meaning of a duet. There is a comic symmetry to their misunderstanding: Glennie is unfair to Linda, during the performance, and Linda returns the favor at the end.

By focusing on this misunderstanding, deaf interaction is normalized, attention is drawn away from disability to the point that one might not even realize that the two performers are deaf—not in an erasure of disability, but through the showcasing of Glennie’s musical virtuosity, her domination of the stage, and the skit’s focus on the friction which this creates between her and Linda.

This friction presents, as part of the musical lesson of the skit, what a duet is *not*, and in so doing suggests more fair ways that children might play with each other, musically or non-musically. This aspect of play is an enduring aspect of the musical performances on *Sesame Street*, where adults often act in childlike ways. Analogs for children, Glennie and Linda show what can go wrong if we fail to listen—however it is in all of our human diversity that we do so. This skit presents an ethics of attention based not only in listening, but also in giving space for others to speak, make sound, and communicate. Through a comical demonstration of misunderstanding, it delivers a lesson on how understanding

starts from fair and balanced communication.

## Education

*Sesame Street* was met with a broad range of reactions to its educational model after its debut:

Echoing the thoughts of many traditional educators, preschool authority Carl Bereiter of the Ontario Institute for Studies in education wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* the morning after the program's premiere that the program was too far removed from "structured" teaching and warned that the program could fail because "it's based entirely on audience appeal and is not really teaching anything in particular."<sup>34</sup>

It received an equal amount of criticism from progressive educators, some of who thought that the program was too traditional. Frank Garfinkle, a professor of education at Boston University wrote in the alumni magazine that "any claim that *Sesame Street* is a major educational or media innovation is preposterous. The values implicit in the form and content—strictly three Rs with a mixed bag of dressing—are traditional... The image of *Sesame Street* as a unique vanguard of educational experience is a mirage."<sup>35</sup>

When the program was later slotted to be shipped abroad in international co-productions, the BBC turned it down. Children's program chief, Monica Sims, described the program "authoritarian" referring to its aims to change children's behavior and its emphasis on right answers.<sup>36</sup> This last observation is at odds with the intentions stated by Joan Ganz Cooney in her inaugural research for the program: almost all of the experts she interviewed wanted to see the teaching of cognitive habits—as defined by Jerome Kagan to be analysis, generating hypotheses, and reflection—rather than trying to teach them skills such as how to read. The idea was to teach how to think, not what to think.<sup>37</sup>

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34. Davis, *Street Gang*, 200.

35. Davis, 201.

36. Davis, 211.

37. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 23.

That there were such varied responses to the educational model of the program speaks to its complexity and its resistance to educational labels, traditional or radical.

On the face of it, *Sesame Street* quite literally conforms to the broadcast model of education. The whole project is, after all, inherently instructivist: it was created as a response to the question “how can we use new technology to give preschool education to as many children as possible?” The program uni-directionally streams educational material to the learner watching and listening at home, who is left to absorb the information. The learner has no say in constructing their own education. When it comes to the educational material it presents on basic literacy and numeracy there are, as noted by the BBC, clear right and wrong answers. Furthermore, the program has a curriculum designed by education researchers with intended outcomes and takeaways for each lesson.<sup>38</sup>

Literacy and numeracy education are, however, only part of the educational project of *Sesame Street*. A great deal of the programming can be interpreted as, and has been expressed by its creators, as giving kids a cultural and emotional education.<sup>39</sup> A majority of this cultural and emotional education is open ended. In the skit with Itzhak Perlman, viewers are exposed to the stunning playing of a professional, the attainable playing of a child, disability, ability, and co-mutual visibility. When the two musicians play for one another, they do so to express their mutual relationship, not simply so that the other may listen. They are both listening and playing *with*.

What is a child at home supposed to get from this? This is where *Sesame Street* may be simultaneously instructivist and broadcast-based, but is moreover *non-striated*. I use this term *non-striated* to denote a space which is not hierarchical and bounded like striated space as understood by Deleuze and Guattari, but does not fall into the “nomadic” and free spaces which they describe as “smooth.”

The *listening with* aspect of its educational model drops the learner into an existing

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38. Davis, *Street Gang*, 117.

39. Ostrofsky, “Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children’s Interactions with Pop Music’s Aesthetics in the 1970s,” 297.



network of understanding, discourse, and culture, such that what they take away from the lesson depends on their personal proclivities and needs, whether that is simply hearing the master violinist play, or the understanding that some thing that is easy for one person can be hard for others. The combination of the educational goals of the experts in Cooney's report and the musical ethos of Rapso, we get a program where children are taught how to *listen* as a cognitive habit.

In a chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* titled "[The year] 1400" the duo establishes a binary between smooth and striated spaces. This chapter, or rather, this plateau, might be described as a strophic prose poem where the concept is introduced several times, each time through a different lens. The binary is rated to fabric versus felt, agrarian versus nomadic societies, and distances versus magnitudes, to name a few.

To the best of my knowledge, the pair never uses the term "non-striated," but they state that no space is only smooth or only striated, but must be an ever-changing mixture of the two as one gives rise to the other.<sup>40</sup> Given that they also recommend that you read their book the way that you would listen to a record,<sup>41</sup> I interpolate out from this binary the gradation of the "non-striated" which does not necessarily imply smooth amorphism, but moreover a lack of the ruled, bound, measured, and governed spaces of fabric, the state, and—in this case—the traditional classroom.

Ivan Illich problematizes the striated classroom in his book *Deschooling Society* where he argues that learning would be improved by the abolition of formalized compulsory education. Along these lines, Illich says that it is delusional to think that we can determine what is necessary education for others and what is not.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Illich demonstrates the ways that the traditional classroom asserts itself as the only worthwhile source of

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40. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474.

41. Deleuze and Guattari, ix.

42. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (Hasbro, 1970), 12, <http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=d8e2ca8f363e74990fdc794505cb3879>.

education, which Illich argues actually limits the number of skilled and educated people<sup>43</sup>

*Sesame Street*, on the other hand, understands that it is not the only source of education, nor does it attempt to be. In this way its educational material can be much more open ended and nuanced.

In one of Yo-Yo Ma's appearances on the program in the 1980s' he plays a classical quartet with the Muppets. Bob the music teacher appears, but he does not lead any lesson. In fact, he is pushed off the stage by a conducting Big Bird who tells him to take a seat after Bob hints that he finds the whole affair silly.

Where is the schooling, where is the teacher, in this skit? The traditional teacher is physically forced off the stage, leaving no clear instructor. Perhaps the teacher is the program itself. While the producers have presumably decided what should be taken away from this lesson—have in a sense decided what should be learned—there is no direction or guidance into how it should be watched. Ivan Illich proposes that in the place of traditional educators we have pedagogical counselors who would advise a student on where to seek instruction, what methods of learning would be appropriate for their skills, and the like. A role more like that of a subject librarian or a museum curator combined with a personal tutor.<sup>44</sup>

The presentation of classical music in this skit falls more in line with this style of focused curatorship; The producers of *Sesame Street* present to children a number of performances deemed appropriate for their age and level of understanding, but do not coerce their view or their understanding in one direction or another.

Of course, this is a written out, synthetic performance. It's not footage of Ma playing at Carnegie Hall, but something written with the express purpose of educating and entertaining children. While children are free to make their own judgements on the performance and learn from it on their own, it is sandboxed. It is a slice of worldly music—Yo-Yo Ma—fictionalized into an entertaining and open-ended skit.

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43. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 39.

44. Illich, 43.

Illich argues that “childhood” as a period of life separate from infancy, adolescence, or youth did not begin to appear until the Renaissance, and not in its present form until industrialization.<sup>45</sup> He continues that childhood is not only a modern invention, but is also a burden to the adolescent, who is prevented from being whole person.<sup>46</sup>

One might argue, then, that a true Illichian education would disavow the entire idea of children’s’ media and simply present children with performances of worldly art—perhaps in this case simply with *The Muppet Show*. This idea holds less water when you acknowledge that, again, the role of the Illichian counselor is to curate materials appropriate to the skills and understanding of the learner, not just to throw them into the deep end of, say, molecular biology and tell them to swim. Anarchist education entails the lack of coercion, not the lack of guidance.

Furthermore, the argument that it is non-Illichian because it is is children’s media depends on the assumption that *Sesame Street* is educational material only and not itself a work of highly intentional and expertly crafted media. Analyzing *Sesame Street* as virtuously constructed media opens a whole tool set for understanding as well as bringing us closer to the production experiences of the Broadway, TV, and radio producers who were writing the show.

Illich also argues that obligatory schooling divides society into the realms of the “academic” and the “non-academic” and thereby renders education non-worldly and the world non-educational.<sup>47</sup> On *Sesame Street*, the musical education is more wordly than it is “educational,” giving children a more or less direct look into the world of popular music. Even the show’s set, based on actual streets and buildings in Harlem<sup>48</sup> has a wordly character to it where children learn *casually*—by which I mean, even when they are not being taught a lesson in spelling, they are being exposed to themes of difference and co-existence, not to mention exposure to kinds of music which they may not have heard and

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45. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 13.

46. Illich, 14.

47. Illich, 12.

48. Davis, *Street Gang*, 154.

to the people who make them. In this way, the world is rendered educational. Likewise, education is rendered wordly as, for example, B.B. King singing about words that start with B. This is a lesson in literacy presented through music which is very much “of the world” and has its own real racial, social, and historical discourses which are rendered in its very vibrations. This is not “childrens music” or music built from scratch particularly to teach children words that start with B, but rather a worldly art form adapted for this particular lesson-context.

I say all of this not to make the hard-line argument that *Sesame Street* is virtuous and non-traditional, but rather that it is resistant to educational classifications. It is somehow at once instructivist, yet open-ended. This is what I mean when I say that *Sesame Street* is non-striated: It is not a reproduction of the traditional classroom where students are coerced into learning what their teachers deem important, but instead learners are free to interpret the skits to find whatever emotional or cultural meaning that they themselves need. Neither is it a smooth and amorphous Deleuzeian space with no educational goals or structure, but instead a sandboxed, curated space of open-ended cultural and emotional learning.

This all makes sense given that the program was developed in order to help close the gap between underprivileged and middle class preschoolers.<sup>49</sup> These are learners who, definitionally, have not yet been schooled. Therefore all of their learning so far has been casual and incidental. Illich addresses this exact problem when he argues in the introduction to *Deschooling Society*, that poor students will always be behind their wealthier counterparts.<sup>50</sup> Poor students lack the books, conversations, and travel which casually educate wealthier children. A non-striated, Illichian education, then makes perfect sense for a televised early-childhood supplement.

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49. Cooney, “The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education,” sec. 1.

50. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 5.

## Funding, political backgrounds, and deschooling society

Perfect sense, except for the fact that it was funded by the nation's two largest philanthropic organizations—the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford Foundation—and the United States Government. Critic John Leonard spoke to this conflict directly with his comment in the *New York Times* that “Any project seducing the philanthropies of two private foundations and a government agency is suspect.” With this statement he was questioning the ability of the program to be a truly socially liberal institution, stating that “Government agencies are permitted to exist... only so long as they use hair sprays to attack our various social Medusas.”<sup>51</sup> Leonard points to a central conflict in this study of *Sesame Street*: how radical is it really? How radical can it really be, given its establishment patronage?

As a partial answer to this question, I would say that the program ended up being more radical than its proposal suggested. This was in no small part due to executive producer Joan Ganz Cooney's trust of her artists and the resulting hands-off approach to leadership.<sup>52</sup> For example, a distinctive feature of *Sesame Street* is its urban set:

Jon Stone, who wrote, produced, directed, and acted on the program knew from the start that he wanted a set which moved as far away from the conventions of children's television as possible. Inspiration struck in the winter of 1968 when a PSA by the New York Urban Coalition aired on television. The PSA, which opened with the printed message “send your kid to a ghetto this summer” was a biting satire in the style of a travelogue which pointed out the lack of amenities for urban children. Seeing this, Stone realized that the show must have an inner-city set. For urban children, the sets of traditional television—enchanted castles, circuses, toymakers workshops—were utterly foreign spaces. But “for a preschool child in Harlem,” he later commented, “the street is where the action is. As often as not she is housebound all day while her mother works,

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51. Davis, *Street Gang*, 146.

52. Davis, 155.

and, from the vantage point of her apartment, the sidewalk outside must look like Utopia. Outside there are kids hollering, jumping double Dutch, running through the open hydrants, playing stickball. Our set had to be an inner-city street, and more particularly it had to be a brownstone so that the cast and kids could ‘stoop’ in the age-old New York tradition, sitting on the front steps and watching the world go by.” The set was modeled after the actual streets and buildings of Harlem by set designer Charles Rosen. In particular, Stone wanted a movie style set, in all its detail, not the cardboard and canvas used on children’s television at the time.<sup>53</sup>

Cooney, known for her hands-off approach to leadership is remembered by Stone as responding to this idea by saying “something to the effect that we were the people she chose to create this program, and if this is how I saw it, so be it.”<sup>54</sup>

This idea of an urban set, and the racial politics which that entailed, came after the funding was secured. In effect, what the funding agencies of the Children’s Television Workshop were signing off on was Cooney’s proposal to use television entertainment as an educational medium for preschoolers. Given the state of the children’s media landscape at the time<sup>55</sup> this was no conservative proposal, but perhaps its radicality was seen more as technological than social—at this point the ideas as they were presented did not include the racial politics which we will see in the Hoots and Ma skit in section X, but were more involved with questions of the ability of the technology to educate. This education was intended especially for inner-city children as part of the humanitarian goals which undergird the project, however, throughout its conception and production, the Children’s Television Workshop tried to make a program that would appeal equally to children of all classes. In short, the program which received funding in 1967 was perhaps not what aired in 1969.

Of course, to receive continued funding, they must have satisfied their patrons and

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53. Davis, *Street Gang*, 154.

54. Davis, 155.

55. Davis, chapters 1, 3, and 4.

not offended their sensibilities. This may have been made possible by the fact that the Children's Television Workshop was running all of their lessons and skits through scientific trials with children and they aired what worked. Follow-up research was regularly conducted to make sure that kids were learning "in vivo"<sup>56</sup> and perhaps this was enough.

This answer is a bit hand wavy, and *Sesame Street* did eventually lose government funding: In 1972 the Children's Television Workshop launched a plan to phase out federal funding by 1981, as the Nixon administration was opposed to the entire principle of public television and wanted to end the production of new episodes of *Sesame Street* and its sister program *The Electric Company*.<sup>57</sup>

There is another way, however, of looking at the problem of funding and leftist politics. So far the question has been "if *Sesame Street* was so radical, how did it get funded by such high-profile institutions?" But where did the assumption arise that these are incompatible? It comes down to pragmatics: In order to keep up with the non-educational television competition which was only the turn of a dial away, televised preschool education would have to be just as entertaining.<sup>58</sup> This is just showbiz. What do you get when you turn Broadway writers into distance-learning educators? You get anarchist education, not because of socio-political ideologies, but simply because it is a solution to the problems of the format. Watching with parents is encouraged, but ultimately it must be entertaining enough that no proctor is required to keep the child focused on the program, and in preschool distance education there is no possibility for coercion: Other techniques of attention must be found. For a number of reasons, almost all of the experts interviewed by Cooney wanted to see the teaching of cognitive habits, as defined by Jerome Kagan as analysis, generating hypotheses, and reflection, rather than trying to teach them skills such as how to read. She writes "in the opinion of most, a television program would be very useful which would teach young children how to think, not what to think."<sup>59</sup> This

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56. Davis, *Street Gang*, 118.

57. Davis, 218.

58. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 38.

59. Cooney, 23.

is non-striation par excellence: the student is not guided down a predetermined path, but instead encouraged to cultivate certain attributes which will help them see their own path through whatever situations they may experience.

Going forward, when my analysis refers to aspects of *Sesame Street* as “ecological,” “deschooled,” or “anarchist,” these are not to imply that executive producer Joan Ganz Cooney was an anarchist media theorist who constructed a program based on her philosophies of education, but rather that the answers to the particular design problems which the writing team faced led them to a particular philosophy of design which, by way of a sort of convergent evolution, lies so close to the above philosophies that Ivan Illich provides a functional language for the analysis of *Sesame Street*. Taking as my definition of anarchism, “the principled opposition to coercion,” what we have here is instead “the pragmatic disutility of coercion.” Is this anarchism? In many ways no, but the results are so similar that it is hard to tell the difference, or if that difference is really meaningful.

This section has analyzed the ways that attention and understanding play out in the educational project of *Sesame Street*. *Sesame Street* gives us insight into alternatively distributed and technologically mediated education. The pandemic has provided, or rather, forced, a laboratory of new modes of serving instruction and educational materials, as well as new paradigms of digitally mediated labor. *Sesame Street* can be thought of as an experiment in distance learning. The program was a fairly radical and experimental production when it first appeared, and its model still seems to be working. It raises the question, looking forward, as to how we can design more resilient forms of education, and how these educational practices can cultivate liberatory forms of listening.





## Prologue to Part II: Geophones, televisions, worms

I spent something like a quarter of my life on the south side of Chicago. There was a summer during that period where I got into the habit of biking down to the 63rd street beach to comb the sandy shore for pebbles. There were two kinds that interested me: shiny black pieces of anthracite coal, and pale grey honeycombs of steel slag. Some thirty miles down the coast, at what now is the Indiana Dunes National Park, the beach is littered with pebbles of all kinds, glittering happily beneath the surf or ice of the ancient lake. Here, however, in the scorched earth left behind by the bonfire that built and destroyed America, the pebbles were largely fossils of that recent past.

That summer I went on a sound walk organized by the Midwest Society of Acoustic Ecology at the former site of the US Steel foundry. A section of the massive industrial campus had been re-wilded and returned to its pre-steel state of fresh-water marsh. Some birds chirped, we saw an egret, but it had turned out to be one of those hot summer days where the air is still, heavy, and all the more stifling for its enveloping silence.

At some point the walk took us to a part of the wooded hammock where the artists had driven microphones—geophones—into the earth. When my turn came around I put on the headphones and listened.

I was immediately made aware of my own weight on the ground beneath me. Any small motion and I would hear myself in the microphone like an earthquake. Any large motion and the bugs, which I now realized were all around me, would stop and I would have to wait for some time before they started to move again.

I had never heard anything like it. It was a sound impossible to describe in terms of our air-based hearing. And I was part of it. The subterranean bugs heard and responded to me just as I to them. Through the assistive technology of contact microphones and digital amplifiers, I was given access to the worm's-ear view of the ever-present world beneath my feet. The sounds were foreign, but in no way unpleasant. Is this the sound of an ant, a worm, or a species that I've never encountered? For me as an air-based listener,

this was the sonic experience of a complete outsider.

The worms may have heard me, but worms don't have ears. They are able to hear the movement of other animals, to hear *my* movements above them, though their very sensitive skin. They were able to listen and engage in the vibrational sensorium just as I do, but through a completely different physiological mechanism. It is reminiscent of one of Oliveros's sonic meditations which instructs us to "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears."<sup>60</sup>[V] Ears are to air microphones as the skin is to contact microphones, like the one I experienced dug into the ground at the former steel mill. Listening like a worm and listening to worms teaches us about the many possibilities for radically different forms of listening, but also the real material and social barriers and striations that bar us from or move us towards these different forms of listening.

## ***The Young People's Concerts: classical music and mass media***

The Bernstein *Young Peoples Concerts* are perhaps the best known example of public classical music pedagogy. Leonard Bernstein's tenure on the program spanned 14 years from 1958 to 1972. The program, televised by CBS, was intended to expose adolescents to classical music by meeting them where they were in terms of musical understanding. This included explaining concepts in classical music through references to popular culture. The goal of the program was not uplift through classical music, but rather to center pleasure and enjoyment within musical connoisseurship. Bernstein seemed concerned with music appreciation for its own sake, separate from the class performance which is so often central to classical music appreciation.

This program marked a different way of doing classical music pedagogy. Bernstein was critical of the traditional modes of music appreciation, which he described as falling

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60. Oliveros.

either into the categories of anecdotes and nothing about music, or formalistic analysis. He saw the first as coy and the second as dull. Instead, across his pedagogy, he chose to focus on the mystery of meaning in music. He breaks musical meaning into four categories: narrative-literary meanings, atmospheric-pictorial meanings, affective-reactive meanings like triumph or melancholy, and purely musical meanings such as musical jokes.<sup>61</sup> His pedagogical intention was “to create and recreate a communally engaged audience”<sup>62</sup> and his goal is reflected in this turn toward this framework which is engaged and analytical, yet qualitative and accessible.

In a letter to Humphrey Burton, Leonard Bernstein wrote that

“The great benefit [of television], for me, is the educational value, not only in the pedagogical sense but in the best sense of acquainting people with new stuff they can come to love (which is what I mean by education, rather than having to memorize the conjugation of an irregular verb.) Bringing music close to people... has always been my lifelong desire and goal even in writing my music. And I think there is nothing that comes near to television for this purpose. This is the best communicative means, and, after all, communication is what television is about.”<sup>63</sup>

Bernstein makes a distinction here between “pedagogy” and “education,” suggesting that education is something more humanistic and having to do with pleasure and appreciation, rather than learning for simply pragmatic reasons. Bernsteinian education, which television enables, is about exposing people to new things that they can come to love. Education and classical music are not, importantly, about that oft cited ideal, *uplift*.

In her book *Class, Control, and Classical Music* Anna Bull analyzes the socio-cultural meanings of classical music in British society. She argues that the practices of classical music contribute to the formation of a middle-class selfhood as middle class people use

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61. Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People's Concerts*, 14.

62. Kopfstein-Penk, 51.

63. Kopfstein-Penk, 71.

the cultural capital of the music and its institutions to maintain class boundaries through the accrument of “cultural capital”—a word which refers to any form of value that can be acquired through classical music practices.<sup>6465</sup>

Bull analyzes how the ethos of long-term dedicated practice which is seen in classical music means that those who are unwilling or unable to invest the time and resources required are unable to participate. This, combined with the ideal of “autonomous” art which positions classical music outside of social, political, and economic concerns, creates a well disguised boundary which preserves middle class spaces.<sup>66</sup> To this point, it is put rather frankly by Claire Hall that ability in classical music can be understood from a Bourdieusian perspective as simply the investment by the musician’s parent’s and teachers in middle-class ideals.<sup>67</sup> The idea of classical music providing economic and spiritual uplift from poverty is perhaps most recently and famously demonstrated in Venezuela’s El Sistema and the propagation of numerous El Sistema inspired organizations. In essence, these organizations stipulate that if you get impoverished children to act like middle-class children they will be better off and find both economic and moral uplift.

Bernstein’s pedagogy does not interact with class in the same ways. The ethos of the *Young People’s Concerts* is, as seen in the letter above, one of “education” not “pedagogy.” The goal is not to provide uplift for underprivileged youth, but instead to acquaint them with new music.

However, it is not completely without its class boundaries. Though Bernstein is quoted by his student Alicia Kopfstein-Penk as making no distinction between highbrow and lowbrow, saying that “there is only ‘brow,’ ”<sup>68</sup> he did engage in pedagogy which appreciated the lowbrow through the highbrow: Bernstein worked to convince people to appreciate the “lowbrow” music of jazz, folk, and pop by relating them to “highbrow”

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64. Anna Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

65. Bull, 3.

66. Bull, 6.

67. Bull, 7.

68. Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People’s Concerts*, xvi.

classical music.<sup>69</sup> As much as this does to “elevate” these other musics, which have been overlooked by white and monied society, using western classical music as a metric re-inscribes its superiority and ideals of universality. David Hesmondhalgh argues that we should look at the ways that music reinforces structures of power, rather than reinforcing old narratives about the power of music.<sup>70</sup> In this case, although Bernstein is expanding the discourse of the power of music to these lesser-appreciated art forms, he is inadvertently using music to reinforce the power of the classical music institutional ecology—that is, the framework of organizations that make up the classical music world.<sup>71</sup>

I read this in large part as a symptom of how inescapable class is in classical music. No matter the engagement, even if it is accessible pedagogy and education via electronic mass media, the power of the classical music establishment and its institutional ecologies are re-inscribed. As we will see in section II, even parodies of classical music uphold its status as much as they deride it. By setting up the elite musical culture as an object worthy of deflation, its status and spectacle are preserved in their high place.<sup>72</sup> In a sense, the middle-class parents studied by Bull have the world that they want: there will always be an inside and an outside to classical music. There will always be the worm and the worm listener: those who listen from the inside and those who listen from the outside. This difference, however, does not have to look like class-warfare. Though the *Young People's Concerts* engage in classical metrics, the education is kind, welcoming, and based in exposure and entertainment, not uplift. After all, most viewers of the televised concerts were adults—only 6% were the target audience of the “typical 13-year old.”<sup>73</sup> This demonstrates a co-permeability of worm-listening across the earth-air barrier. It is media enjoyable and educational across the spectrum of classical music familiarity. The *geophone* that is television allows for aerial ears to listen to the underground, and the worms hears

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69. Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People's Concerts*, 63.

70. Kopfstein-Penk, xiii.

71. Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, 27.

72. Charles Hiroshi, “Shooting the Keys: Musical Horseplay and High Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane F. Fulture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252.

73. Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People's Concerts*, 2.

the aerial listeners listening,

## The looking is the beauty

I have written against the idea of art as uplift. However, art and media—two terms which I will not draw a distinction between—can change how a viewer or participant perceives the world. Visual artist David Hockney, whose art addresses questions of perspective, vision, and the nature of looking, said, comparing his painting *Yorkshire Landscapes* to television that “if you show the world better, it’s more beautiful, a lot more beautiful. The process of looking is the beauty.”<sup>74</sup> This remark points to the way that art and media can change the way that we perceive the world to ways of looking that are themselves beautiful. This seems to have been largely the goal of Bernstein, who sought to give young people new tools for understanding music of all kinds. In a more abstract sense, we see this same behavior on *Sesame Street* with the forms of listening and *listening with* that it showcases. Ultimately, as we will see in part II of this paper, the looking as the beauty can provide spaces for social discourse and change.

This may share some superficial similarity to the theories of mass media posited by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s ideals of “emancipatory art,” though I find emancipatory art to be a misguided concept deeply rooted in classism and ideas of classical music as uplift. Art and media have liberatory potential, but not in the Adornian sense.

Adorno and Horkheimer famously problematized popular art and mass media under late stage capitalism in a chapter of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* titled “The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception.”<sup>75</sup> “Late capitalism” or “late stage capitalism” refers to an economy in the trajectory of capitalism where the concentration

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74. Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 100.

75. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

of capital has already taken place and the problem becomes finding new consumers such that supply does not exceed demand. In this stage of capitalism, advertising takes on new importance, as the economy depends on manufacturing new consumers as well as new goods.<sup>76</sup> Where the worker was alienated from their labor in earlier stages of capitalism, they are now additionally alienated from their needs, drives, and imagination.<sup>77</sup> During this period, Adorno argues, popular art masks this alienation by providing diversion and pleasure which provide psychological shelter from the truth of alienation and so pacifies the masses.<sup>78</sup>

According to Adorno, emancipatory art, unlike popular art and media, would bring about the painful experience of being aware of one's own alienation. Emancipatory art reawakens the feelings of dissatisfaction and unease, the results of late capitalism, which have been occluded by the entertainment industry, popular art, and advertising. Emancipatory art makes possible the recovery of this "experience of the negative." This accomplishment, however requires that the artwork be difficult to understand according to normal modes of thought. This difficulty reveals to the listener the inadequacy of normal modes of thinking, which opens the mind to new ways of thinking as it reveals the old ways to be lacking. However, because this opening of the mind is revelatory of formerly illusory perception, it leads to anxiety rather than elation. Ultimately, this realization can lead one to try to change their relation to the world by changing the world itself.<sup>79</sup> This negation of consciousness wrought by emancipatory art can be achieved, he argues, not through the direct negation of standard artistic practices, which may come across as banally contrarian, but rather through sheer inscrutability and the creation of an uncanny sensation where the meaning and reason for the creation of the work are not immediately attainable.<sup>80</sup>

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76. Bruce Baugh, "Left-Wing Eletism: Adorno on Popular Culture," *Philosophy and Literature* 14, no. 1 (1990): 66.

77. Baugh, 66.

78. Baugh, 67.

79. Baugh, 67–69.

80. Baugh, 71.



Bruce Baugh, problematizes this line of reasoning, pointing out, rather simply, that the arcane nature of Adorno's "difficult" art necessarily requires a certain amount of training to understand and create. This training requires time outside of productive labor, thus implying a class distinction in which some are required to work while others are able to live off the labour of workers and follow intellectual pursuits instead. Adorno's emancipatory art is damned from the start because it requires a bourgeois class.<sup>81</sup> It is in a sense, trickle down emancipation. Baugh argues instead that emancipatory art can arise from, and is in fact best created by, mass culture itself. He argues that this was seen with the art and music of the 1960s.<sup>82</sup>

Both authors put stock in the power of "emancipatory" art to expand the consciousness. I find emancipatory art in this context to be a misguided concept deeply rooted in classism and ideas of classical music as uplift. While Baugh may argue against the classist aspects of Adorno's characterizations of emancipatory art, he only reinforces ideas of music in general as uplift and as having the ability to expand class consciousness. For these reasons, I do not find the idea of art as either emancipatory or pacifying a useful category for analysis, though this is not at all to say that children are not alienated.

Children in the United States are not generally part of the labor force and so are not engaged in productive labor. This would seem to disqualify them from capitalist alienation. However, children are in a constant state of labor at school, where they receive an education designed to prepare them for their entry into the labor force. With no control or ownership of their education, these students are at an ultimate level of alienation, especially given, as Paulo Freire says, it is only through inquiry that we make ourselves human: Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention through inquiry. Apart from inquiry individuals cannot be human—it is through engagement with the world that our humanity manifests.<sup>83</sup> Children are also susceptible to the same kinds of

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81. Baugh, "Left-Wing Eletism: Adorno on Popular Culture," 74.

82. Baugh, 77.

83. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 72.

advertising and manufacturing of the consumer which define late stage capitalism. A child may very well be just as alienated as their parents.

While I think that emancipatory art is a misguided ideal, I find value in the idea that art can cultivate in the viewer new ways of observing and sensing the world and that this is seen in, and was the ultimate goal of, Bernstein's public pedagogy with its focus on teaching musical connoisseurship and appreciation as well as the musical education on *Sesame Street* and its goals of socio-emotional learning.

## Part II

The Worm-Listener:  
Parody, Virtuosity, and Childhood

## Listening *with* the Music: Ecological Humor

Victor Borge was a Danish pianist of Jewish heritage. He was known for parodying the names of composers and unexpectedly inserting recital-style performances of the classics into what were otherwise comedy routines. During his career in the United States, which spanned from the 1940s to his death in 2000, Borge made numerous appearances on radio, television, and Broadway. Borge stressed that he never makes fun of the music, but rather makes “fun with the music.”<sup>84</sup>

Parodies of classical music such as those in the Marx Brothers’s *A Night at the Opera* or the animated short film *What’s Opera, Doc?* uphold the status of classical music as much as they deride it. By setting up the elite musical culture as an object worthy of deflation, its status and spectacle are preserved in their high place.<sup>85</sup> The representations of classical music in *A Night at the Opera* simultaneously “punches up” to classical music, mocking its elitism, while it bridged the divide between elite and pop culture. While this was entertaining to those outside of the classical world, it offered nuanced entertainment to those with a knowledge and admiration of opera, especially given that classical music parodies are often inside jokes meant for those in the know.<sup>86</sup>

Making fun *with* the music resonates with Annea Lockwood’s “listening with”—the idea that in any environment you are not alone when you listen to the birds and the insects, are not listening *to* the ecosystem, but listening *with* it, for as you listen to the birds and insects they are listening to you and to each other. This mode of listening dissolves the direct subject-object relationships of “listening to,” favoring a more reciprocal relationship of co-awareness and I use this phrase to describe situations and practices of listening which engage in this mutual sonic awareness. When Borge is making fun *with*, rather than *of* the music, he is, like Lockwood, dismantling subject-object relationships—instead of the performer and audience as subjects ridiculing the musical object they instead cultivate

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84. Hiroshi, “Shooting the Keys: Musical Horseplay and High Culture,” 255.

85. Hiroshi, 252.

86. Hiroshi, 251.

an environment of co-creation where the objectivity of the musical and comedic act are not, in a sense, *focused* on the work of art as funny object, but on the relationship as the source of humor. That is, Borge is not making of Mozart himself when he parodies his name, nor is he really deriding the classical music establishment, for as Charles Hiroshi Garrett argues in “Shooting the Keys,” a paper on the Marx brothers and musical parody, parodies of classical music uphold the status quo.<sup>87</sup>

Borge said that it was generally the case that those who laughed the most at his performances were those who were more musically educated. In order to be successful, all parody and satire require that the audience has a certain level of cultural knowledge.<sup>88</sup> However, he stressed, he was always working two audiences at the same time—those knowledgeable of classical music and those who are not. He said “my jokes must be understood by everybody. Nobody must be bored.”<sup>89</sup>

Borge is engaged in a refocussing of the subject-object relationship to one which is more reciprocal and circular. The entire audience, who he was adamant about not leaving behind comedically, are in a sense gathered around the piano, having fun with Mozart, but not at Mozart’s expense. Part of the humor is accomplished by Borge making himself the object of ridicule and self depreciation, as he clowns around the musical object, playing multiple pianos, falling off the piano bench, and reads music in strange and unusual ways. In a sense, he plays an *virtuoso-fool*, who is highly skilled, but has little sense. In one performance, he keeps overshooting his octave leaps and missing the right edge of the piano, so he gets up and moves the whole piano over a foot to compensate.

Borge uses the music not as the object of the humor, but instead showcases the music while he uses it as a structure around which a comedy routine is built. This is what Borge called “making fun with the music.” It is a restructuring of subject object relationships akin that that of Lockwood’s “listening with.” He is not looking at the music,

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87. Hiroshi, “Shooting the Keys: Musical Horseplay and High Culture,” 252.

88. Hiroshi, 249.

89. Hiroshi, 256.

pointing at it, and laughing at its expense, rather he is engaging with it, listening to it, and constructing something new in collaboration with it. In general parody tends to highlight certain qualities and virtues of the music, even if it makes fun of others. Borge thought that this attitude had brought new listeners to classical music, who would go back to the concert hall for more music without the comedy.<sup>90</sup> As with Bernstein, we see the use of something accessible—humor, pedagogy—as a gateway into classical music.

A similar style of “making fun with the music” as undertaken by Borge can be seen on *Sesame Street*. Some of the exact same devices are used, such as the parodying of the names of classical composers and physical clowning. More significantly, however, there is a shared sense of using parody to uphold the aesthetic and cultural status of the music while changing the subject-object relationships around and within it. These shifts allow for listening *with* the music. This is one of the prevalent forms of classical virtuosity expressed on the program: *virtuosity as listening with*, expressed through the cultivation of co-mutual listening. Of course, the showrunners are not trying to get children into concert halls in the way that Borge and the classical establishment which supported him were with an adult audience, but the educational mission of *Sesame Street* is benefits from this style of entertainment and the shift in relationships which it brings about. Similar to, but different from the gateways of accessibility created by Bernstein and Borge, on *Sesame Street*, humor creates space for *engagement* with music which is otherwise culturally considered exclusive and esoteric. Play creates a momentary world where the rules of classical music are different and one can play at a concert hall with improvised instruments, unheard-of composers, and strange musical collaborators. This is the geophone of the *worm listener*. Play allows one to enter, listen to, and be listened to by the musical underworld of classical music which is so often out of limits.

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90. Hiroshi, “Shooting the Keys: Musical Horseplay and High Culture,” 256.

## ***“Pretty Great Performances:” play, parody, and classical music on Sesame Street***

Recall the particular design constraints of music on children’s television faced by the writers of *Sesame Street*: They wanted to expose children to new “serious” music—that is, music made for adults rather than children—without boring them, but also without boring their parents, who they hoped would be watching along. In the words of Victor Borge “nobody must be bored.” One solution to this problem of two audiences is parody, for example the aforementioned performance by Norah Jones, where she parodies her own work. A related technique was used during virtuoso flautist James Galway’s appearance on the show in 1989. Not lyrical parody, but rather a parodic pastiche, Galway performs with the “All Animal Chamber Music Ensemble” at “Barn-egie” hall. As part of the “Pretty Great Performances” concert series—a parody of the New York Philharmonic’s “Great Performances” series—host “Phil Harmonic” introduces Galway and the “works of the great composer, Johan Sebastian Fox.” Galway delivers an impressive flute performance to the accompaniment of a chamber ensemble of animal puppets, all quacking and barking along in strict counterpoint.<sup>91</sup>

While the Jones and Galway performances are obviously very different, they both take the form of a juxtaposition of “serious” music and performances—that is music primarily for and by adults, often with implications of listening behaviour such as dressing up and listening attentively—with contexts or lyrical contents which are inappropriate for the genera.<sup>92</sup> Or, alternatively, silly music is presented in serious contexts such as the concert hall. This virtuosic whimsy works because it showcases skilled performances and exposes children to music which is perceived as having quality, while being varied enough to hold their attention, all the while being amusing to any parents who are present. This

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91. “Sesame Street: “Pretty Great Performances” - James Galway #2,” accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx3WmDzM-uc>.

92. See also, Ostrofsky, “*Sesame Street* as a Musical Comedy-Variety Show,” 18.

not only exposes children to music, but moreover fills the basic goals of the program by providing a place where social-emotional skills can be modeled through the structure of classical music. Akin to Borge's use of classical music as structural center and aesthetic object around which to center comedy, *Sesame Street* uses classical music in the same way, in order to provide a place for the modeling of social-emotional skills. Recall Evelyn Glennie's onstage conflict with Linda—a lesson in how *not* to listen and a satire of unfair play.

This is an example of an enduring aspect of musical guest performances on *Sesame Street* and its presentation of virtuosity: adults pretending to be children pretending to be adults. In order to model adult activities and culture through the emotional lens of children, adult stars act like children who are dressing up and acting like adult performers, rather than like their normal adult persona. This adult-child hybrid presents aspects of both childhood and adulthood: The performers are competent and skilled, yet vulnerable, curious, and sometimes immature. "Childhood" as a period of life separate from infancy, adolescence, or youth did not begin to appear as an idea until the Renaissance, and not in its present form until industrialization.<sup>93</sup> These stars point to and perform childhood as instead a fundamental aspect of human nature: everyone has some child-ness in them and some wear it on their sleeves more than others. Rather than encouraging kids to grow up and act like adults, virtuosic whimsy places real value in certain aspects of childlike behavior.

In general, virtuosic whimsy—the combination of highly cultivated skill with contexts and actions which are comically at odds with the seriousness that is expected for performers at this skill level— is more pronounced in performances of classical music than popular music. This is likely just because classical music is itself associated more with an aesthetics of solemn ritual than any other music. It as a point around which parody can easily be made, especially for children whose primary cultural understanding of classical music is that it is "serious", "fancy", and exclusive. In order to shed this im-

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93. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 13.



age of classical music, it is often expressed and parodied as *play*. In another appearance on “Pretty Great Performances,” a tuxedoed Galway performs a duet for flute and pool toy.<sup>94</sup> His duet partner, Sesame Street inhabitant Maria Figueroa,<sup>95</sup> plays a literal toy. Part of this skit, ostensibly, is simply to demonstrate to children that air is needed to play the flute just as it is needed to fill a swim tube. However, it seems significant that the pool toy is played by Maria the Puerto Rican repair-shop worker and not any of the many musicians who live on Sesame Street. The writers of this skit are leveling classical music as something attainable and fun—attainable to a working-class woman of color—rather than serious, somber, and esoteric. Like Galway, Maria is clothed in concert dress and taking part in the pomp and circumstance, however, what they are doing is not ritual, but play. Virtuositic whimsy allows for classical music to retain its cultural status, practices, and aura, but crack open its exclusivity: the pomp and circumstance, serious atmosphere, and the expectations of time devoted to the cultivation of instrumental skill—which are all ultimately a stand-in for class—<sup>96</sup> become themselves a thing of play, deconstructed and sandboxed.

## Authenticity

An appearance by Yo-Yo Ma on the program reveals the unusual status which “authenticity” has on *Sesame Street*. In a similar skit to that of Galway at “Barn-egie Hall,” Ma plays the “Beethoven quartet for two honkers, dinger, and cello,”

The scene opens with the honkers--Muppets with bulbous noses  
and trumpet-shaped horns on their head--slapping their faces  
and honking while a dinger--a Muppet with a bell on its head--stands

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94. “Sesame Street: “Pretty Great Performances” - James Galway #1,” accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAw-0HXrTno>.

95. “Maria,” accessed May 10, 2021, <https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Maria>.

96. Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, 7.

between them. Big bird, dressed as a conductor shakes his head as they honk. Bob the music teacher enters stage right

"Hi Big Bird."

"Oh, hi Bob."

"What's uhh, what's going on?" he asks with a shrug, hands in pockets.

"They are getting ready to perform a quartet."

"A honker and dinger quartet? Sounds interesting, Big Bird" Bob chuckles.

"Hmmm... You think it's silly, huh? Well, let me tell you Bob, they just rehearsed and they sounded *beautiful*!"

"Well, beautiful or not, Big Bird, it can't be a quartet because a quartet needs four musicians, and I only see one, two, three." The camera cuts to the honkers and dingers who count themselves as Bob counts.

"Ahh, but number four is coming--right now. So if you just take your seat"--Big bird pushes Bob out of the frame and off the stage--I will introduce him."

Turning to the audience, Big Bird announces: "The Sesame Street Chamber Music Society is proud to present our very special guest: Yo-Yo Ma!"

With applause, Ma enters stage left in a tuxedo with cello in hand, and turns to the audience "We will perform for you, the Beethoven quartet for two honkers, dinger, and cello."

The camera cuts to a close up of Bob, who puts his hand on

his chin and wonders aloud "He wrote that, Ludwig van Beethoven, the famous composer?"

"No," Ma replies, "Murray Beethoven, the famous honker!"

Motioning toward the green honker to his left, the Muppet bows to great applause.

Ma turns towards the three other performers, who gather near each other in preparation. Murray Beethoven raises his chin to count them all off, Ma replies with the same gesture, and they begin to play with a clean downbeat. Ma plays melodic material on the cello, demonstrating impressive technical ability with playing double stops and fast passages high on the fingerboard. The honkers and dinger have three notes between them and provide counterpoint and accompaniment in a tight coordination. During the performance, Ma orients himself toward the other players. Although he looks away from them to consult his music, which is only half in the shot, he leans towards them as he plays, and spends about half the performance turned toward them making direct eye-contact. The dingers and honkers themselves are oriented semi-circularly in the way that chamber ensembles often do.

They finish with a triumphant sonority and the audience applauds. Ma rises to shake the dinger's and honker's hands.<sup>97</sup>

This performance demonstrates a playing and listening which is highly conversational. We can see this a foil to lesson on how not to listen provided by Evelyn Glennie.

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97. "Classic Sesame Street - Yo Yo Ma and the Honkers," accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89sFEuEuTYM>.

Here, everyone takes their turn without a fuss, and communicate constantly through non-verbal cues, which render their intense listening highly legible. In terms of whimsical virtuosity, we see Yo-Yo Ma performing with conviction and commitment something which Bob, who is often rather musically conservative compared to the Muppets, sees as silly as he defaults to a stodgy adult perspective. In this performance Ma and the ensemble break from the flow of balanced phrases within what what sounds like a rounded binary form for call-and-response exchanges between cello and the Muppets' ensemble of children's toys. These call and response passages are isolated exchanges that sit outside of the underlying phrase structure and highlight Ma's willingness to *play*. The professional, grown up, Ma and his *very* expensive cello<sup>98</sup> break the continuity of the classical piece in order to engage in conversation with the sorts of sounds you would find in a child's toybox or attached to their tricycle. Both the Ma and Galway performances display a whimsical virtuosity, where players are highly skilled and engaged in the performance, but do not take part in the somber and serious performance aesthetics common to classical music. This manifests both through their individual performances and the situational humor of toy instruments and puppet collaborators.

This particular blend of virtuosity and situational humor brings into the mix questions of authenticity: In playing the music of "Murray Beethoven, the famous honker," Ma is represented as a serious and skillful interpreter of music, but not as a voice from the past. The classical canon seems less canonic on *Sesame Street*. Authenticity as a category is also destabilized, though it is a fraught subject to begin with. In her article "Staging Authenticity" Karen Leistra-Jones conceives of 19th century authenticity as a performative category, not a stable category which some musicians had and some lacked.<sup>99</sup> In other words, authenticity is something which artists performed, just as they performed interi-

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98. Katherine E. Finkelstein, "In Concert, Searchers Retrieve Yo-Yo Ma's Lost Stradivarius," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1999, I haven't been able to find what instrument Ma was playing at the time this skit was shot in 1985, but the instrument that he famously forgot in the back of a NYC taxi a decade later was a 1733 Stradivarius valued at \$2.5 million.

99. Karen Leistra-Jones, "Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms and the Politics of *Werktreue* Performance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 400.

ority. Adding to this appraisal, authenticity seems to me something which is created in the audience and not in the performer. Artists may cultivate authenticity—Leistra-Jones says that musicians performed authenticity and cultivated it in their personas—however, I want to stress that authenticity does not exist in isolation. Authenticity is something ascribed to the musician by the audience. The performer can suggest authenticity, but ultimately their status as “authentic” falls on the listener. I see “authenticity” as a socio-cultural artifact— something like a superstition—and if authenticity does not exist, how can a performer “be authentic?” All that a performer can do is take up the cultural signifiers of authenticity and present them back to the audience.

When this audience is composed of young children, however, the listenership has little conception of what constitutes classical authenticity. On *Sesame Street*, the idea of authenticity to the classical canon is destabilized. In performing a piece by “Murray Beethoven, the famous honker,” Ma’s image as an interpreter of a venerable canon is redirected. Whoever composed this piece is more or less meaningless to the skit’s young audience. Most children at this age would not be interested in or privy to the classical canon which Beethoven represents, so the voice from the past—the authenticity of which is created in the locus of the audience—simply does not exist. Nor does *Sesame Street* try to teach the classical canon from this valence. The emphasis here is on classical music as a set of practices which are fun, approachable, and based in attentive and co-mutual listening. While classical music on *Sesame Street* means dressing up in traditional garb and putting on a performance in a concert hall, it includes toys for instruments and is steeped in exploratory play, rather than tradition and arcane cultural memory. Authenticity and composers’ intentions are not emphasized on *Sesame Street* because these are things which are as much the work of the audience as they are the cultivation of the performer. Virtuoso characteristics are attainable on *Sesame Street*, but historical and compositional authenticity are essentially impossible given the audience’s youthful lack of education on the topic.

## Virtuosity

*Sesame Street* does not present a homogeneous image of virtuosity. This is likely due to their diverse set of guest stars. Even between different skits featuring the same artist we see them play different genres and cut different images of virtuosity.

In the presentation of classical virtuosity on *Sesame Street*, we see a number of regularly used techniques: multi-traditionalism, childlike playfulness and vulnerability, and general approachability. These techniques establish classical music as something other than the stodgy music of plaster busts and starched collars. Bob the music teacher and his establishment ideas are often in tension with the desires of the actual celebrity classical musicians who appear on the program. To this effect, classical musicians on *Sesame Street* demonstrate their virtuosity by *not playing* classical music. *Sesame Street* looks a lot like a musical Utopia, where all kinds can play together without the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, or species—the limits of this kind of Utopia are discussed in the next section of this paper. Regarding classical music and performers, however, as a part of the program’s educational goals of exposure-based music appreciation as well as the social-emotional lessons embedded in the forms of listening which it teaches, the program uses the virtuosic performances of classical musicians to deconstruct the cultural contexts and boundaries that are maintained around classical music and reconstruct the genres and its performance practices as a form of play akin to any other. This is a “punching up” akin to that of that Marx bothers in which parody challenges the social status of the music—in the honkers performance, the idea that classical music is somber and serious—while maintaining an appreciation for its aesthetics. The piece performed by Ma and the Muppets sounds like classical music—delightfully so—and places value on the aesthetics of the common practice era. However, its situational humor of virtuosic whimsy and its concomitant positioning of classical music as play rather than as serious work, practice, and ancestor worship suggests that we can have the aesthetics of classical music without the exclusivity and class boundaries—without the hours of violin lessons and investment in

middle-class identity—that are inherent in its rituals.

## Character Study 1: Yo-Yo Ma and Virtuosity as Listening With

Yo-Yo Ma's individual persona interacts with *Sesame Street*'s educational project to create a diverse presentation of virtuosity. Between his five appearances on the program in the 1980s he is shown as playing with incredible technical skill and concentration, as culturally omnivorous, and lastly, using the technique of virtuosic whimsy, Ma takes part in the leveling of classical music. This says a number of things about Ma and his virtuosity: that it knows no stylistic bounds, that it is internalized, and that though he is virtuosic, he is human and his art is approachable. All of these are attained via the ways that he is shown listening, whether that is listening cross-culturally, in an ensemble, or whimsically.

In one appearances, now posted on the *Sesame Street* YouTube channel as "Sesame Street: Yo Yo Ma: The Jam Session," Ma is absorbed in practicing a somber melody in an alley on one of *Sesame Street*'s urban sets.

Hoots, the saxophone playing owl, whose accent, vocabulary, and general composure suggest an alignment with African American identity, leans out of the window of a walk-up, saxophone in hand, and asks Ma if his cello can "play anything a little more--upbeat?" Ma rises to the challenge, replying to Hoots that his "cello can do anything your saxophone can play."

Hoots takes up the friendly gauntlet and begins to play a number of soulful phrases on his saxophone, each more complex than the last, to which Ma responds with a near exact copy down to phrasing and tremolo. After three volleys, Hoot concedes the duel, turning to the camera and saying "Man. That is one mellow, cello"--fun wordplay, but also an acknowledgment that

Ma has soul.

While Ma is now known for genera-crossing performances, when the first of his *Sesame Street* appearances aired in April of 1986<sup>100</sup> Ma was just beginning to play outside of the classical cannon, releasing his first cross-over albums, *Bolling – Suite for Cello and Jazz Piano Trio* and *Japanese Melodies*, both in 1984.<sup>101</sup> We can read this performance by Ma on *Sesame Street* as an early expression of his now-famed versatility. The cross-culturalism for which Ma is known is not just about the aesthetic appreciation of diverse music, but is part of a cultural-political project of seeking trans-national empathy and fellowship. This is sought both through the supposed universality of classical music, as seen in Ma's globe-trotting "Bach Project"<sup>102</sup> and through celebrations of the diversity yet compatibility of the world's musical cultures as seen in Ma's Silk Road Project. This second attitude is expressed by a musician in the trailer for *The Music of Strangers*, a 2016 documentary about the Silk Road Project, when he says "We don't speak perfect English or perfect Chinese or perfect Persian, but we speak perfect music language."<sup>103</sup> Ma's collaborator treads the well-worn fantasy of music as a universal language, but here framed as the tongue of international fellowship and educational partnerships.

On *Sesame Street*, early intimations of this project of universality are apparent in Ma's performance with Hoots. Ma's ability to crossover and play jazz and blues showcases a world where folks of all kinds can play together. In this skit, Ma demonstrates a technical mastery of the instrument and aural skills. He does this not through traditional classical performance, but through the vessel of cultural omnivory. His virtuosity is established not just as a classical soloist, as the opening of the skit suggests, but as someone who can play anything, and everything equally masterfully. Not to mention gamely. Ma eagerly crosses imagined musical and cultural divides, smiling all the while. He models a willingness to

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100. "Episode 2210," accessed May 11, 2021, [https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Episode\\_2210](https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Episode_2210).

101. "Listen & Discover," accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.yo-yoma.com/listen-discover/>.

102. "About [the Bach Project]," accessed May 11, 2021, <https://bach.yo-yoma.com/about/>.

103. "The Music of Strangers Official Trailer | SILKROAD," accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pim7mvgXerg>.



make friends with just about anyone through the power of listening and play.

But moreover than omnivorous playing, what is showcased here is an intense act of listening—virtuosically so. Ma's presentation of omnivory is slightly, yet importantly, different on *Sesame Street* than it is in his general public persona. Rather than focusing on genera fusion or on the universality of certain canons, here, Ma demonstrates virtuosic and universal listening by playing along extemporaneously with music that is outside of his traditional purview as a cellist. Hoots displays listening through his responses, verbal and musical. This is listening across boundaries. Ma is Asian and a human being, and Hoots is African American and an owl. What is demonstrated in this performance is cross species, cross cultural, and cross racial listening. Musical kinship is established between these two characters who come from different worlds. They are able to listen to each other, challenge each other, play together, and find commonality, while maintaining what makes them unique and highlighting their differences. Through this exercise in musical play and co-mutual listening, the two musicians go from standing apart, as they play in different genres, reflecting different class and social worlds, to standing together: to *understanding*.

This is not just Ma's performance here as a cross-cultural collaborator, but an enduring aspect of his public persona. In his public appearances, Ma almost always presents a kind and affable personality. His virtuosity is framed through an interpersonal and cultural kindness and curiosity. He is presenting *virtuosity as listening with*, expressed through the cultivation of co-mutual listening. To David Hockney, the process of looking was the beauty.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, here, the *listening* is the beauty, is the virtuosity.

## Race and genera

From his vocabulary, vocal delivery, and occupation as a jazz saxophonist, it is clear Hoots the owl is Black. Hoots is voiced by African American puppeteer Kevin Clash, the first

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104. Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 100.

black puppeteer on the program, who also gave voice to Elmo. Clash designed Hoots's gravely voice after that of Louis Armstrong.<sup>105</sup> The question of what is going on in this skit racially is complex, as it is on the program in general. The diverse cast of monster and humanoid Muppets as well as humans of all races and abilities models the diversity of an American city. *Sesame Street* scholar Ute Kraidy argues that in the way, in addition to teaching skills related to basic literacy and counting, *Sesame Street* provides children with the cultural context to navigate the world as informed citizens.<sup>106</sup> On the program, difference is addressed while likeness is highlighted.<sup>107</sup> <sup>108</sup> In a touching performance by Elmo and Whoopi Goldberg, they compare their skin, hair, and fur. As Elmo learns the differences between their bodies, Whoopi points out that her brown skin and his red fur may be different, but are both beautiful and worth being proud of.<sup>109</sup> This is both a message of Black is Beautiful, as the program draws attention to and celebrates Black hair and skin, and a more universal message of body positivity. Difference on *Sesame Street* models the diverse environment of American cities, teaches body positivity, and exposes children to other cultural ways of living and being.

The ethos behind the idea that exposing children to a diverse spread of adult would lead to children from different backgrounds growing up to have "one more thing in common," as expressed by Joe Rapso, is not limited to the program's musical education. When the producers of *Sesame Street* approached Cree artist and activist Buffy Sainte-Marie about appearing on as a musical guest, she was such a fan of the show's educational model that she suggested that she instead assist in developing a curriculum on modern-day Native American culture, which she did from 1975 to 1981.<sup>110</sup> In her appearances, she

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105. Kevin Clash, *My Life as a Furry Red Monster: What Being Elmo has Taught me About Life, Love, and Laughing out Loud* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 41. Also see the biographical documentary of the same name.

106. Ute Sartorius Kraidy, "Sunny Days on *Sesame Street*? Multiculturalism and Resistance Postmodernism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2005): 13.

107. Kraidy, 18.

108. In 1992, *The Economist* criticised this aspect of the program, calling it "hyper-tolerance" which leads to "an intolerance of those who do not practice this hyper-tolerance." See Kraidy, 14.

109. *Sesame Street*: Episode 2746—Grouch Appreciation Day, November 12, 1990, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce0yGNG\\_VEU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce0yGNG_VEU).

110. Davis, *Street Gang*, 235.

teaches about native American music and ways of life. She breastfed her child Cody on the program in what was the first ever broadcast of breastfeeding on American television. *Sesame Street's* educational goals are as rooted in giving children a place to learn about the diversity of the world as they are in basic literacy and numeracy. The cultural curriculum tends to look more like exposure through candid conversations between characters than formal lessons.

The highlighting of similarity through acknowledgement of difference via conversation is apparent in Ma's performance with Hoots. In this skit we see an Asian Ma play music with an aurally African American owl. In popular American culture, "soul," "swing," and "groove" are somatic experiences and expressions of phrasing and micro-timing which are especially present in African American musical styles. Because of their identification with the music of Black America—and likely due to a cultural disrespect for Black musical labor—the ability to play with these categories of expression is often attributed to racial makeup. Obviously, however, these are performance practices which are and can be learned. On the other side of the spectrum from the cultural myth that Black Americans play music naturally with feeling is the idea that Asians and Asian Americans are dedicated practitioners who play with great technical skill but little feeling or emotion. Mina Yang addresses this cultural phenomenon in her book *Planet Beethoven* where she writes that "This critical trope casts Asians in a binary opposition vis-à-vis Westerners: Asians have the technique, Westerners have the heart, the soul. The image of Asians as automatons, robots without souls, appears frequently in the Western imagination, standing in as an effigy conjured up by the Western resentment of Asia's growing prosperity."<sup>111</sup> This skit begins by highlighting the cultural divide between the Asian Ma and the Black Hoots by pitting their two preferred musical styles against one another. However, using the technique of highlighting similarity though difference, whatever dissimilarities exist between Ma and Hoots in terms of musical talent or inclination are rendered incon-

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111. Mina Yang, *Planet Beethoven: Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 79.

sequential. Ma is able to play with the same feel as Hoots; Their differences still exist, but those which can be ascribed to racial determinism are rendered obviously false. All kinds can play together and differences are a source of generative exploration and comparison rather than self/other mutual distrust. This skit might also be read as an elevation of jazz and blues as art forms on par with classical music. In this regard, it seems to be speaking directly to the divide between Grosse Pointe and 148th street which Rapso described. Difference, with the help of virtuosic listening and musical performance, can blossom into mutual understanding.

### **Interiority and the limits of understanding**

It is worth noting that in the beginning of this skit while Ma is practicing his face is expressive, his eyes are closed, and he has no written music. He is completely absorbed in this recitation from memory. This appears to be a cultivation of the image of interiority. Compare this to 19th century reviews of pianist Arabella Goddard which were impressed that she played from memory,<sup>112</sup> or the more contemporary film promo of “the last romantic” Vladimir Horowitz, in which he records canonic works almost entirely without consulting the scores. Playing without written music has long been considered an act of virtuosity in the classical performance canon. It is an outward expression of interiority, both in the idea that the music is now completely contained within the performer, and that their practicing and performing are concerned not with just playing the notes, but with capturing the emotional and spiritual aspects of the piece which are not contained in the printed music.

In playing classical music without a printed page, and then playing along with Hoots’s soulful saxophone crooning, Ma’s interiority is established both in the classical sense and in terms of the “feel” and “soul” celebrated in jazz, blues, and related art forms which make significant use of extemporaneous performance. This multi-cultural interiority, the

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112. “Miss Arrabella Goddard,” *The Musical World*, April 23, 1853,

ability for the supposed universality of music to transcend genera and culture establishes virtuosity as *virtuous*. The logic goes that if virtuosity means universality and universality is morally good, then so is virtuosity. This takes Joe Rapso's hope that the music on *Sesame Street* would have a socially cohesive function even farther. By not only knowing diverse music, but taking part in it, one becomes an ideal global citizen who speaks not in broken English, Mandarin, and Farsi, but in that fabled lingua franca, Music. This raises the question of what is actually accomplished by the ethos of understanding seen on *Sesame Street* and other public media, and what is essentially virtue signaling. Ma expresses his virtuous virtuosity and liberal understanding by playing jazz, Hoots, on the other hand, is given no such versatility. Ma is presented as skilled, flexible, and intellectual, while Hoots, despite his talent, is rooted in a single tradition. In this way, the classical musician is able to co-opt Black musicality and in so doing establish his moral high-standing through liberal omnivory.

This is the limit of public-media style understanding. In this skit, classical music and jazz are placed side-by-side. At once it looks like an act of leveling, where each music is presented as complete in its own right. However, this utopic world of fun and play covers up the long history of epistemological violence that the classical music and white musical establishments have enacted upon the music of the African diaspora. In this way, understanding stems from erasure and omission.

These are the limits of understanding. Understanding is itself insufficient for the utopia that *Sesame Street* presents if it leads no further than understanding alone. Understanding must come from a place which leads to action, lest understanding simply lead to more understanding. Empathy can be offered in a broadcast, but if this empathy is used only to establish one's status as a virtuous, educated, middle-class subject, then it only exists to re-establish class boundaries: middle class people who understand versus working-class people who do not.

That said, listening can itself be a radical and repairative action when it comes from an

awareness of our listening positionality: listening *with*, rather than simply listening. The Ma and Hoots skit displays something somewhere in between, as Ma listens, and listens to himself being listened to by Hoots. However, the relationship is asymmetrical. Other skits on the program, such as Issac Perlman's "what's hard for you" appearance present a more symmetrically mutual listening. And this is where understanding on *Sesame Street* differs from understanding on NPR and *All Things Considered*. On NPR, in the world of the public radio sound, one can only listen as common folk speak into the microphone of the unacknowledged reporter. On *Sesame Street*, however, the child viewer is given numerous models of fair and radical co-mutual listening. While the Ma example falls short of the program's other more symmetrical and effective examples of listening, the basic premise of the idea is there: careful *listening with* is an active decision which can lead to the healing of deep historical wounds, divides, and misunderstandings.

## **Character Study 2: Evelyn Glennie: Teaching the world to listen**

Evelyn Glennie is a Scottish percussionist born in 1965.<sup>113</sup> She is one of the first and only western musicians to make a career as a solo percussionist. From around the age of eight, Glennie began to lose her hearing.<sup>114</sup> In response to these changes, she developed an entirely new way of listening and engaging with sound which is not based in the ears. In her documentary and performance film *Touch The Sound* Glennie presents the idea that listening is simply a specialized form of touch. While for many people listening happens primarily in the ears we all listen with other parts of our body. Glennie is known to play without shoes on so that she can better feel the sounds of her own and other musician's instruments. Glennie sometimes takes advantage of the multisensory nature of listening and, in order to convey that she is playing something very quietly, during concerts will move her mallets without actually striking the notes. She says that "if I want to play

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113. Evelyn Glennie, *Good Vibrations: My Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), 6.

114. Glennie, 40.

something quietly, sometimes I move my mallets but I'm not actually touching the instrument. So, the audience feels I'm playing extremely quietly, and they really do believe they're hearing something even though nothing is coming out. It's because they're seeing the movement [...] that automatically gives them the feeling that sound is there." This highlights the strong visual component of sonic perception that most people are unconsciously taking part in, and gives a glimpse into the listening practices that Glennie herself uses.<sup>115</sup> This reminds us that listening is fundamentally a multisensory practice and that *earing*—perceiving through the ears—is not the same as listening<sup>116</sup> and that the senses are contextually interdependent: Vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell are idealized types that do not exist in isolation.<sup>117</sup>

Glennie said in an interview that her “aim, really, is to teach the world to listen. That’s my only real aim in life.”<sup>118</sup> Her emphasis on listening is highly resonant with the kind of listening taught on *Sesame Street* so much so that she is far from the only musician who engages in mulitmodal listening. In the Ma and Honkers skit, Yo-Ya Ma demonstrates his virtuosic listening by privileging his sight-line to the honkers over looking at his music. Here, he clearly demonstrates a listening with the eyes, where the tempo and the interaction of the parts—all sonic information—are communicated visually as much as they are aurally. In one of Glennie’s appearances on the program, her virtuosity and ways of listening are highlighted.

The scene opens with Oscar and Telly peeking over Oscar’s trash cans. Three children stand beneath them in green t-shirts with trash can lids on their heads and dirt rubbed on their faces.

“Okay Telly, now it’s time for band practice.”

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115. Steph Ceraso, “(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences,” *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 109.

116. Ceraso, 105.

117. Jessica A. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 1 (2017): 212.

118. Holmes, 172.

"Okay."

"Let's see were gonna have uh Briana and Skylar are going to bang on the uh, old tin cans. We've got Raphael on the torn boots. Heh heh. Telly, you're going to be playing the dented horn."

"Yeah." Telly's eyes open wide as he gives the instrument a blow, and a dull series of notes, all smeared together, comes out.

"Ahh, beautiful."

Telly grunts and gives the instrument a frustrated slap, as if to dislodge something stuck inside of it.

Oscar looks off camera to stage left and the camera pans to follow.

"Hey, who are you?"

"Oh, uh, this is my friend, Evelyn Glennie!" Telly offers.

"Pleased to meet you, Oscar."

"Yeah, well, I'm a grouch. I'm not pleased to meet anybody. Now scram, will ya'? I've got a Grouchketeer band practice going on."

"B-b-bu-but-but Oscar, Evelyn's always dreamed of playing in the Grouchketeer band."

"Absolutely! And look at the wonderful instruments that you have." Glennie motions to the pile of garbage.

"Well, you can't play in the Grouchketeer band, 'cause you're not a Grouchketeer."



"Uh, b-bu-but Oscar, she's a great musician. Uh, you should hear he play, really."

"Do I have too?" Oscar groans.

"Go on Evelyn, play something for Oscar."

"Okay, okay, let me take my shoes off."

"You're going to play with your feet?" Oscar interjects. "Hey, this could be grouchier than I thought."

Evelyn laughs. "Well, it's just that it helps me hear the music."

"Evelyn's deaf Oscar. She can't hear."

"Yeah, than how can she hear what we're saying?"

"I'm reading your lips, Oscar."

"Oh, well, quit reading and start playing! I haven't got all day."

"Okey-doke."

Turning to her snare drum, Glennie plays an impressively smooth buzz roll. She taps out syncopated rhythm on top of it with accented strikes to the drum head.

"Woah."

"Hahaha! I told you she was good!"

"Yeah, I'll say."

"So, can she play in the Grouchketeer band?"

"Nah."

"But Oscar, you said she was good!"

"Well I don't need good, I need *grouchy*."

"Ohhh, wait wait wait" Glennie interjects. She pulls out two Tubz, a kind of stiff hollow plastic tube that creates a resonant pop when played on any hard surface. She uses them to play an impressive flurry of notes on a pair of bongos.

"Hmm. Well, not grouchy enough."

Glennie returns to her snare drum, where she plays another impressive short solo.

"Sorry. Audition is over."

"But Oscar, you gotta let her play. She came all the way from Scotland just to play in the Grouchketeer band, and Evelyn can play just about anything."

"Anything?" Oscar raises his hand to his face and looks down, scheming. "How about my *trashcan*?" he asks with mischief in his voice.

"Your trashcan!" Telly replies, offended. "You want a great musician like Evelyn Glennie to play your *trashcan*!?"

"Stand back, please." Evelyn replies, and she plays a fourth solo, drumming on the outcropping of junk and trashcans that Oscar the grouch calls home, moving all over and creating different tones from the various materials.

"Wooaahh. Wow! What a sound!" Oscar responds. "That was the grouchiest music I've ever heard!"

"S- so- so can she play in the Grouchketeer band?"

"Play in it? I hope she never stops!"

"Oh Oscar, thank you."

"And now, the Grouchketeer band will play, *Sonata for crushed cans, torn boots, dented horn, and trashcan* by Ludwig von Blech-toven."

"Oh, great!" Glennie raises her sticks in appreciation.

"Yeah, heh heh. Okay Grouchketeers, a one and a two and--"

The players break out into cacophony.

"Ahhh... Talk about easy listening!" Oscar muses as he conducts.

In this skit, Glennie's virtuosity is reinscribed through the challenges lobbed at her. While Telly baulks at Oscar's request that she play his trashcan, Glennie rises to the challenge with full confidence. For her, the step from instrument to non-instrument is not a step down in organological quality, but instead a step up in capacity for virtuosic display where she showcases and embodies a sense of boundary-less child-like play and "gameness" to approach a challenge. This is another example of the ways that the status of the classical music establishment is challenged by format comedy, pastiche, and general silliness, yet is simultaneously reinforced. Glennie's virtuosity, perhaps because of the way that it has been removed from its institutional context, is approachable, classless, omnivorous, and has an aesthetic taste which is wider than what is normally performed in classical music halls. This is a common role that Oscar and other Grouches play on *Sesame Street*, where they represent something like an ultimate cultural other. They are a culture with exactly opposite customs and tastes as the human world. They go to the "Break-it Shop" to get new toasters dented, they hoard rather than throw out garbage, and they play cacophonous music. On one level, they represent the extreme diversity of the urban environment, and interactions with them are opportunities for expansion and cross-cultural compassion. If we take Grouches as the ultimate others, whose ideas of beauty are expressly opposite those of the classical canon—which sets up classical music as the most structured of musical forms—then the desire that the guests have to play with them serves to demonstrate the omnivorous virtue of these performers, and also dissolves

their image as stodgy custodians of a dusty old style.

Grouches also seems to represent the icky childhood spirit that takes delight in, or has yet to be inculturated into a fear of, gross and icky things, loud noises, and the thrill of chaos. The Grouchketeers give space for Glennie to perform childhood and the beginners eyes that come along with it. This demonstrates a stark contrast between her persona and playing style, and those of the mainstream classical world. and the tradition, stodginess, and class boundaries which are associated with it.

This tracks with Glennie's general public persona. In performances, she likes to announce the program herself, something which is almost completely unheard of in classical music. She does, this, she says, so that "the audience have an immediate sense of who I am."<sup>119</sup> She takes a similar attitude to her wardrobe: When she played at the BBC's Proms in 1989, she very intentionally chose a more casual outfit which included pants rather than a dress, in order to seem more approachable.

## **Disability and the politics and poetics of listening**

Glennie does not like to have her deafness highlighted in her concert reviews or news coverage, but says that she prefers to have her music judged with no mention of her disability. She hedges that "The only good thing about it, I sometimes think rather despondently, was that the news of my success might have encouraged other deaf and handicapped people."<sup>120</sup>

While the view of hearing loss that Glennie's persona presents does not pathologize hearing loss, she does not identify as "deaf." Her official bio on her website does not use the word deaf, but says instead that her "hearing declined from the age of 8." In the past she has described herself as "deafened," and has maintained a distance from Deaf culture. In 1994, two years before her appearance on *Sesame Street*, she told the magazine *Parade*

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119. Glennie, *Good Vibrations*, 3.

120. Glennie, 59.

that “I don’t see myself as a deaf person... Rather, I’m a hearing person who happened to lose her hearing. It occurred gradually, so I was able to adjust to each level. I couldn’t make myself into a deaf person and say, ‘Oh, I can’t do this’ and ‘I can’t do that.’ ” Her personal narrative has been one adaptation and resilience in order to remain in hearing society, though her last sentence suggests that in the ’90s she had a defeatist conception of what it meant to be Deaf with a capital D, that is, a member of Deaf culture. With time, her attitudes seem to be changing, and she began to learn sign language in 2008.<sup>121</sup> Her defeatist conceptions of what it means to be Deaf, however, most certainly come from a lifetime of being told at nearly every development in her career as a musician that it would be impossible for her to become a professional given her disability, and a lime-light which has the tendency to highlight her disability rather than her playing. Despite Glennie’s nuanced relationship with disability, and her distaste for media coverage which highlights her deafness, she is perfect fodder for the projection of “supercrip” fantasies. This is the idea that deaf or otherwise disabled people compensate for their disability through the acquisition of sensory “super powers” like hearing entirely through touch, something technically known as “cross-modal plasticity,” which despite media portrayal, is only known of in cases of deafness was acquired before spoken language was learned by a child. Supercrip tropes epitomize the narrative of overcoming disability and shift the burden of stigma from the society which has created a world designed without accommodations for the disabled to the individual who *should* be able to overcome their disability. These tropes are distinct from the visual and tactile acuities associated with hearing loss—or as some prefer, Deaf Gain<sup>122</sup>—which are better understood as cultural practices that exist within the Deaf community.<sup>123</sup>

Gelnnie encapsulates everything which is messy about listening. Though her mission is to teach the world to listen, her relationship with listening is itself complex, nuanced,

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121. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing,” 186.

122. Holmes, 174.

123. Holmes, 181.

and always in flux. The neoliberal utopianism of her goal, “a society where communication and social cohesion are improved by the act of listening,”<sup>124</sup> takes listening for granted as stable category of perception. Her own listening practices are complex, multimodal, and highly publicized, yet are misunderstood by the press which publicise them. Her listening practice aims to bring the world together, yet has alienated listeners with similar disabilities: One user on the online Deaf community Alldeaf wrote regarding Glennie’s forms of listening that “Not every DEAF person can ‘feel’ music like a select few eg Evelyn Glennie... I have tested the theory of being able to ‘feel music by putting my hand on a loud speaker playing music’—vibrations only! I don’t identify [it] as music.”<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, Glennie’s forms of multimodal listening, which involve perceiving sound with the eyes and feeling vibrations in the body are a virtuosic and rare skill upon which to base a musical career, yet are the same mechanism that all listeners, hearing or non-hearing, use to perceive sound along with any level of aural hearing that they may have. And while her experience of listening is fundamentally different than that of a hearing person, her presentations of listening largely pass for hearing and replicate the patterns of ear-based listening. While this is not always the case it is the most common presentation of her listening. There are several moments in her film *Touch the Sound* where the uniqueness of her hearing is highlighted, including one moment where, after striking an enormous gong, she continues to stand near it, listening, long after the sound that the hearing audience of the film can perceive has ended, implying that she can still see or feel the vibrations that are too subtle for the hearing viewers. However, this is more the exception than the rule, and her hearing for the majority of the film is more or less the same as that of the other musicians she plays with.

Glennie brings her multimodal listening practices to the musical educational project of *Sesame Street* and the forms of listening that it encourages. Here, the traditional forms of classical music consumption are eschewed in favor of more active and playful forms of

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124. “Mission,” accessed June 28, 2022, <https://www.evelyn.co.uk/mission-statement/>.

125. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing,” 184.

engagement. Glennie, in conceiving of sound as a specialized form of touch, epitomizes multi-modal full bodied listening. In so doing she radicalizes the very meaning of what it is to listen. She brings this deconstructed listening to *Sesame Street*, where, ultimately, the kind of listening that is taught, both regarding and via the locus of classical music, is one of omnivory and of childlike delight in transgressing boundaries. Both Glennie and Ma listen with their eyes as they practice unusual forms of engagement with classical music and strike new and complex positionalities to the classical establishment that they take part in. Through dress, public persona, and omnivorous virtuosity, both Glennie and Ma transcend the highbrow and arrive at the non-planar space of the middlebrow, which is somehow more musically virtuosic and socially virtuous. In both of these cases it is done through an apparently non-dualistic form of listening which does not see lines of genera, seriousness, or class. Historically, classical music has tended toward highly prescriptive modes of listening, consumption, and production. *Sesame Street*, in an effort toward class inclusion, intervenes in these listening practices, and demonstrates a number of alternatives. These alternatives do both the work of untangling music from the class barriers which surround it, and the work of teaching these forms of listening as social and cognitive skills. Multimodal listening tends toward a more ecological sense of the sound world, where sound is an event in which the listener is participating, is *listening with*, rather than as an object to which they listen.<sup>126</sup>

Glennie encapsulates the promise and shortcomings of listening on *Sesame Street*: though it offers to heal wounds of class and race and improve communication, listening is such an unstable category that it can only be approached obliquely, as listening plain and simple, frankly, does not exist. Listening is not a neutral act of opening your senses to information, but rather a cultivated practice of perception, a socio-cultural technology, always medaited and subject to control, and fraught with all the baggage of the culture that the listening stems from.

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126. Ceraso, "(Re)Educating the Senses," 109.

Furthermore, in terms of ability and disability, “normal” able-bodied hearing is itself an unstable category as ears are exceptionally sensitive organs susceptible to damage from daily activities such as walking near traffic, seeing live music, or the conditions of the workplace.<sup>127</sup> Sound scholar Jonathan Sterne conceives of these forms of hearing loss as “audile scarification”—changes to the body from sounds. He describes audile scarification as “the participation in the everyday urban life of advanced capitalism. [It] is both a form of inscription on the body, and a mode of compliance. To participate in a loud music performance, to subject oneself to the roar of an airplane engine or bathroom air dryer, to attend a sporting event. All of these practices ask something of their attendees’ bodies; they mark them. To submit oneself to an event like this is to consent to a certain potential for audile scarification.”<sup>128</sup> Hearing loss/Deaf gain is a basic element of modern life. Though we may conceive of an able-bodied idealized listener who hears with their ears alone, this listener, or rather, this *hearer* is a transitory and illusory character, as, after all, we will all be disabled eventually if we live long enough.

I am not arguing that *Sesame Street* or Evelyn Glennie are doing something which is naïve or misguided. Rather I think that they are both doing the best that they can at a very difficult and complicated educational and social mission. Fittingly, the way that they do it is always changing. I find that *Sesame Street* succeeds in presenting multiple modes of listening with various levels of nuance, painting a broad and multi-valent picture of what it means to listen, from the shopkeeper listenining to Simon Soundman’s phonographically accurate voice, Glennie ignoring her friend Linda, to Oscar the Grouch’s near exclusive taste for cacophony, *Sesame Street* destabilizes and decenters mainstream listening practices and in its place offers, despite its many shortcomings, an ecological framework for listening—a framework for *listening-* and *playing with*.

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127. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing,” 208.

128. Holmes, 204.



## Prologue to forever: Mushrooms, mycelia, the internet

There is an image I have seen a few times surrounding discussions of mushrooms which places a mycelial network and a projection of the internet side-by-side in comparison. The underground network of tissue that makes up the majority of the mass of the fungal organism bears a remarkable resemblance to the dense and heterogeneous mesh of digital infrastructure which transports so much of our information in modern life. For me, however, the connection between mushrooms and the internet has been far more pragmatic. My love and appreciation for the World Wide Web blossomed alongside and because of a concurrent love for mushroom hunting. When I was about 9 years old I started taking photos of mushrooms on my family's new digital camera and became interested in learning more about them. I did my identifications at that time largely based on online resources, such as Roger's Mushrooms and later Mushroom Observer. The dichotomous keys used in species identification, where questions such as "are the gills attached or detached?" lend themselves well to a hypertext medium, and the abundance of available photographs was a convenient aide to identification.

Befitting the similarities in structure between the internet and a fungal network, the movements and modes of thought that one uses in mushroom hunting are similar to those that one uses in browsing the web, and I think this was particularly true in the days before targeted advertisements, cross-site tracking, and modern search engines. The way that one wandered the links on a personal HTML page or a webring mirrored the bounce from one mushroom to the next, growing out along one arm of the mycelial body. And then there's also knowing which ecological zones lead to what kind of fungal fruits, knowing where to look for what kind of webpage, adding the location of the mushrooms to your mental map of the neighborhood, adding the webpage to your bookmarks. Later, checking these locations for new growths.

But what even is this thing that we call the *internet*? It is often depicted in corporate style art glyphs and advertisements for new web services as a cloud, a globe covered in

lines that look like the tails of comets, or a highway of wires between different devices and services. My favorite heuristic, however, is that the internet is simply a single wire. When I enter [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) into my browser, I am sending a request from my router to Google's router, which may be many states or even countries over. Google receives the request and responds by sending back the information that I asked for in the form of a webpage. This all takes place on a wire that connects my router to theirs, though, this wire is highly discontinuous, and the information bounces through several other routers on the way and through many different internet service providers. It is important to note that [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) is not the *internet* but rather a *web service*. The internet is the wire, is the communications infrastructure that connects computers across the globe, while the web is the media ecosystem that lives on that wire.

This wire is now where *Sesame Street* has taken up residence. While this paper has dealt exclusively with *Sesame Street* within the context of its broadcast on public television, the primary broadcasting of the program moved to HBO in 2015 and then to the streaming service HBO Max in 2020 as changes in the DVD market meant less revenue for Sesame Workshop on public television, though episodes still air on PBS stations—for example, my local PBS station KETC in Saint Louis broadcasts *Sesame Street* twice a week—but episodes air 9-months after they appear on HBO.<sup>129</sup> This might mean that something like this year's Juneteenth episode may never air on public television at all.

There is also a collection of segments from the program at [sesamestreet.org](http://sesamestreet.org) and eight full episodes at a time available at [pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org). It is possible that this is where the majority of lower income children may be watching. This general shift from a broadcast to an internet streaming model must have implications for how easily the program is accessed, which may ultimately effect the kinds of listening which the program encourages. There are three tiers of access: HBO streaming, which is, simply put, a luxury product; [pbs.org](http://pbs.org), for which one needs internet access and a device; and the 9-month-delayed broadcast on

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129. John Koblin, "'Sesame Street,' With Its Five-Decade Library, Moves to HBO Max," *New York Times*, October 3, 2019,

PBS. In New York City, 29% of households do not have home broadband and 18% percent of residents have neither a home nor mobile broadband connection.<sup>130</sup> The hard shift in favor of internet streaming has huge implications for who can access the program and when. A report by the United States Census Bureau from 2018 found that only 85% of American households had any kind of broadband subscription,<sup>131</sup> whereas when *Sesame Street* launched in 1969, 95% of households had a television set.<sup>132</sup> It is quite possible that *Sesame Street* is less accessible now than it has ever been, especially for disenfranchised populations.

It seems to me that the real Sesame playground, in the mushroom-hunting sense, is not at [sesamestreet.org](http://sesamestreet.org) or [pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org), but instead in the depths of bootleg YouTube uploads, [archive.org](http://archive.org), and the segments and skits that people all over the internet are discovering, uploading, and discussing on forums, blogs, and social media. These are primarily adults, engaging with *Sesame Street*, a fixture of their own or their childrens' childhood. These are the "lost media" enthusiasts who rediscovered an episode of *Sesame Street* which only aired once, after numerous parents wrote in to complain that it was too scary.<sup>133</sup> These are the twitter nostalgists who find their favorite songs from their own *Sesame Street* heyday. These are the memesters who find singular brilliance in episode 4077, where Elmo, letting out his chaotic side, "looses his sht over a rock," as one bootleg YouTube upload of the segment put it. There is also "Elmo rise" or "Hellmo," a crudely created image of Elmo rising out of flames of what is presumably Hell.

This is the mushroom-hunting spirit creating a collective conversation about *Sesame Street*. Though it is sometimes crude, I wonder if this is the true listening playground of *Sesame Street* going forward, where the characters no longer belong to Jim Henson,

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130. "Community Tech New York—About CTNY," accessed July 17, 2021, <https://www.communitytechny.org/about>.

131. Michael Martin, *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2018*, American Community Survey Reports (United States Census Bureau, April 2021), 2.

132. Cobett Steinberg, *TV Facts* (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 1985), 142.

133. Kalhan Rosenblatt, "Episode of 'Sesame Street' allegedly removed for being too frightening is posted to social media," *NBC*, June 19, 2022,

Sesame Workshop, or Disney, but are cultural artifacts that enthusiastic individuals are able to reconstruct and recombine to make new meaning. Amateur historians digging thorough digital and physical archives to find lost episodes, those rare mushrooms of delight, or simply to catalogue the show's long tenure—the collection and cataloging, the fungarium work that still to this day is essential to mycological research. My research is indebted to the Muppets Fandom wiki, a project of volunteer enthusiasts and perhaps the most extensive and detailed “finding aide” to the *Sesame Street* corpus.

I am tempted to frame this behaviour as a kind of “post-listening.” If in bird watching—or “bird listening” as Jenny Odell would say—one observes, identifies, and takes note, and in worm listening one sits still in contemplation of the sensorium of others, mushroom hunting combines these two frameworks for listening, both observing the mushroom and seeking to understand the hidden depths of its mycelium, while at the same time delighting in the consumption of the fruits of the soil. Mushroom hunting hardly uses the ears, at least not alone, but relies on both intuitive and experienced multi-sensory perception and understanding of the environment to position oneself in the ecological zones where mushrooms fruit. This post-listening is a multisensory activity which requires the intentionality and focus of deep listening, the ecological spirit of listening with, and uses the eyes, the skin, the nose, and the ears but does not privilege sound nor “earring” as the primary substance nor sense by which listening is carried out. The tech-natives who are doing much of this research and discovery navigate the internet in a similar way, mixing careful attention with intuitive sense for what can be found where, based on a lifetime, even a short one, on the great big computer mycelium. And importantly, it is all done not in search of world piece, nor mindfulness, but simply for individual and shared delight. This takes shape as nostalgia, the collection and love of trivia, and—as in the case of Hellmo—sheer transgression.

Mushrooms are also the delicious fruit of decay, apples growing out of rot. Similarly, the internet's fascination with *Sesame Street* comes at the time of the decay of broadcast

television. These are the fruits of decay, and so was *Sesame Street*, coming out of a moment of divestment from American cities, but also the decay by fire, the intentional burning by dedicated individuals, of the structures of systematic racism that would have prevented a show with a mixed race cast from being produced, and would have disqualified this program from airing, as for example it was during its first year in Mississippi.<sup>134</sup>

Given, on the other hand, how nasty the internet can be, I hope that post-listening is not to listening as post-truth is to truth. I hope that post-listening does not come to mean *not-listening*, eschewing it altogether as a useful category on an internet and in a society where the monetization of attention and the rise of a far-right driven by hateful political aesthetics has put truth as we have come to know it into a moment of crisis. Instead, I hope that post-listening can mean that we listen our hardest in all the ways that we collectively know how, and, if you ask me, I'd say that's how we get to *Sesame Street*.

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134. Davis, *Street Gang*, 201.

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