



Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street

—Mavis Reimer

The television show *Sesame Street*, first broadcast in the United States by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) in 1969, represented a new departure in educational programming for children. One of the core principles of "the enterprise," according to Joan Ganz Cooney, the inspirational woman at the centre of the project, was that the program be a collaboration of "professional researchers" and "experienced television producers" (xv). The approach was unprecedented at the time and initially resisted as unworkable by the producers, but Cooney and the team she assembled insisted that material be developed in consultation with scholars, educators, and educational psychologists; "that material, as it was produced, be tested on the target audience for both appeal and educational value"; and "that producers modify or discard material based on these almost continuous reports from the

field" (xvi). At the same time, however, Cooney and Gerald S. Lesser, the educational psychologist from Harvard Graduate School of Education recruited by Cooney to design the "curriculum" for the show, began from the premise that "the goals were going to be tailored to television and not the classroom" (xvii).

One of the implications of this attention to the medium of the message was that CTW borrowed formats that had already proven to be successful on commercial television. For example, the choice of a magazine format, consisting of "a series of largely unrelated segments" rather than a "continuous episode-length plot" (Morrow 87), was based in part on the reasoning that it would be simpler and cheaper to replace a segment that did not work with the target audience than to discard an entire program. Cooney's directive that the show be "'hip and fast and funny'"

was the result of her recognition of the popularity of the style associated with the NBC comedy variety show *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (Morrow 87). And, when the open call for proposals for segments dedicated to letters of the alphabet brought in the storyboard for "The Story of J," a narrative that "sold" the usefulness of that letter, producers were struck by the educational potential of the "'Madison Avenue' techniques" repurposed for the segment (Kaiserman 334). As Robert W. Morrow reports, when CTW researchers tested "the J commercial" with children, in keeping with their model of formative research, they discovered that cartoons were good teachers of letters and numbers, that commercial interruptions "attract children's attention to the TV rather than degrade it," and that four-year-olds "'can endure enormous amounts of repetition'" (89), outcomes that encouraged producers to request more such letter commercials. Adam Kaiserman observes of this incident that, "[r]ather than fight the most debased of all television genres, *Sesame Street* would turn the form into its most valuable pedagogical tool" (334), replacing the "Buy! Buy! Buy!" mantra of commercial television with its own mantra, "Learn! Learn! Learn!" (335).

The repetition and redundancy characteristic of many forms of TV storytelling are the outcome of the "commercial imperative" of network television to "deliver the largest and most desirable audience to the network's clients," according to television scholar

Michael Z. Newman (17). In the case of *Sesame Street*, producers mapped out elaborate plans for the optimal pattern of repetitions needed to secure the uptake of their messages: there were exact repetitions of program segments, program segments that were repetitions with variations from previous segments, and repetitions of familiar formats with variations in content. Each of these kinds of repetitions occurred within a single program, over a week of programs, during a twelve-week series, across a season, and over a number of seasons (Palmer and Fisch 12). Summative research used to evaluate the effectiveness of the show after the first two seasons revealed that these strategies of repetition and redundancy were highly successful: *Sesame Street* viewing was "positively associated" with school readiness in preschoolers and correlated with reading competence in primary school years (Mielke 90–91), results that have been confirmed in many subsequent studies. Anecdotal evidence from teachers also testified to the effectiveness of the techniques of the show: as *Sesame Street* became popular and then ubiquitous on North American networks through the 1970s, it became the norm for children to arrive at school already knowing their alphabet and able to count (Morrow 2). Indeed, a 1994 "recontact" study of high-school students who had been "frequent viewers" of *Sesame Street* as children found that the developmental benefits of watching the show persisted: these adolescents had "better grades in high school"

(specifically in English, science, and mathematics), “read more books for pleasure,” had “higher levels of achievement motivation,” and “expressed less aggressive attitudes” than peers who had been infrequent viewers of the show as children (Huston et al. 131–32). Moreover, these patterns were evident regardless of their parents’ levels of education, their geographical locations, or their sex.

While the researchers involved in the recontact study concluded from this evidence that the show not only influenced the development of cognitive skills but also contributed to what they labelled “positive social behavior and social competence” (Huston et al. 140), relatively little empirical research has focused on the prosocial potential of television for young people, according to media researcher Barbara J. Wilson, with researchers paying attention, rather, to “media’s impact on maladaptive or antisocial behaviors” in children (89). Humanities and cultural studies scholars might observe that it seems unlikely that controlled empirical studies could ever document prosocial behaviour and social competence adequately, given that these categories are overdetermined, definitionally complex, and contextually specific. Yet, in many ways, the most interesting question about *Sesame Street* is one about social understanding: the question of what the target audience of young viewers made of the utopian location that provided the frame for the show.

The CTW show was first screened as student

protests against the Vietnam War roiled the United States and just one year after the assassinations of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. These two public murders, taking place just a few months apart in 1968, stunned the American nation but can be seen in retrospect as events entirely of their time, that time being a decade of racial turmoil in the United States that lead up to and followed from the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the midst of these societal upheavals, *Sesame Street* arrived on the scene with the assertion of its theme song that these were “[s]unny days,” with everything “A-okay” and its presentation of the peaceful, racially mixed, imaginary New York neighbourhood of Sesame Street as the everyday norm of urban American life.

From the beginning, Cooney conceptualized *Sesame Street* as a way of distributing the promises of the Head Start program (developed as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty) more widely than was possible through the small classrooms specified as the setting for the preschool project. The children imagined as the primary audience for the TV show, Lesser explained in 1974, “are those we have been calling, over the past decade, ‘disadvantaged’— children who live in inner cities, usually poor, usually black or Spanish-speaking” (12), although the CTW group quickly recognized that middle-class children, too, were watching the show in large numbers.



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The curriculum of the show was based not only on the leading pedagogical theories of the day about how children learn but also on the educational priorities identified by “inner-city parents” (Lesser and Schneider 26). From the start, these priorities included not only objectives for competence in symbolic representations (such as letters and numbers) and cognitive processes (such as classification and problem solving) but also objectives for the acquisition of information about the physical environment (both natural and built) and for the acquisition of social competence. This last category specifically included the goal of moving child viewers to “see situations from more than one point of view and begin to see the necessity for certain social rules, particularly those insuring justice and fair play” (Lesser and Schneider 29). Each program opened (and continues to open) with a sequence in which young children of diverse races follow the call of the theme song and collect themselves into groups on urban streets and playgrounds as they move toward the Street. Pointedly overturning traditional cultural associations of children with nature, the opening sequence takes children from flower-filled fields and carries them into the heart of the city.

The discrepancy between the reality of urban American life and its representation on *Sesame Street* was recognized and debated by the originators of the show: Lesser recalls that there was an ongoing argument during the CTW planning seminars “about whether we should depict the child’s world as it is or as we might want it to be” (49). The debate continues to be replayed in two quite different trajectories of interpretation of the TV show. On the one hand, from the first screenings of the program, some critics objected to the idealistic representation as an irresponsible refusal to acknowledge

the actual historical, material, social, and political lives of many Americans. Psychiatrist Leon Eisenberg, a member of the expert panel convened by CTW in 1969 to review the test episodes, for example, observed that “*Sesame Street’s* urban realism was superficial” and “unrelated to the problems that confront the inner-city child,” and recommended “that the producers write segments in which ‘the kids participate in a rent strike, for example’” (Morrow 98). Cornell psychology professor Urie Bronfenbrenner complained that “[t]he children—whether black, white or brown—are charming, soft-spoken, cooperative, clean and well-behaved,” and the adults (“two black . . . and two white”) are impossibly “charming, gentle, smiling, and friendly,” with “no cross words, no conflicts, no difficulties” among them (14). In 1992, a media critic in *The Economist* extended the accusation of superficiality, asserting that the show had “mutated” from “sensible tolerance and respect” into the “pernicious” “hyper-tolerance” of “political correctness,” a hyper-tolerance that was, in his view, in fact a form of intolerance (qtd. in Kraidy 14). While an argument using such loaded language as this can be easily unpacked and dismissed, some of the questions about “the politics of pluralism” (qtd. in Kraidy 15) implicit in the accusation of the *Economist* critic have also been asked by theorists of multiculturalism. For example, discussing the representation of difference on *Sesame Street*, media scholar Ute Sartorius Kraidy

points to the observation of theorist Peter McLaren that utopian multiculturalism, which he also calls “ludic postmodernism,” “largely ignores the working of power and privilege” (qtd. in Kraidy 15).

On the other hand, the staging of the utopian space of *Sesame Street* can be read as a performative, progressive political project. In Fredric Jameson’s introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future*, his massive study of what he calls in the subtitle of the book *The Desire Called Utopia*, Jameson notes the long-standing denunciation of utopianism “as an idealism deeply and structurally averse to the political” (xi) but argues rather for an understanding of “the Utopians” as “offer[ing] to conceive” of “alternate systems” to the dominant one: indeed, Jameson observes, “one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet” (xii). Lesser recalls that the members of the Workshop who argued for a presentation of “the world as we might wish it to be” saw the opportunity to stage an urban neighbourhood as “if we really cared to have something better” (49), and Jennifer Mandel documents the ways in which the producers at CTW sought explicitly to “advance” the vision of the “beloved community” espoused by King in his work “by teaching future generations” what their society could and should be like (4). In 1972, Harvard professor of education and psychiatry Chester M. Pierce praised the program for preparing preschoolers

to be “planetary citizens” of the twenty-first century by providing a “demonstration that various kinds of people can live in harmony”: “In such a harmonious atmosphere, each person expands his own horizons while helping others to expand theirs” (14). Looking backward from the vantage point of what was then an imagined future, we can see that, while we have surely not yet reached utopia, there have been fundamental shifts since the 1960s in the dominant assumptions of American society about racial differences and in the relations between different racialized groups that are now not only possible to imagine but often unremarked and unremarkable in daily life. Seen in this light, *Sesame Street* might be understood as one of the sparks that ignited change.

But *how* do we decide which of these readings is most persuasive? How do we choose whether to think of *Sesame Street* as escapist edutainment that celebrates diversity but turns a blind eye to the actual conditions of existence for many members of the society in which it is produced, or to read the Street as an utopian enclave “in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented upon” (Jameson 16)? Must we resort to recognizing only that both of these possibilities exist simultaneously? In seeking an answer to these questions, textual analysis of the show in itself does not suffice. Kraidy tries exactly this strategy in her close reading of ten episodes of the show from the year 2000 as she seeks to defend

Sesame Street against the charges that it is an example of ludic postmodernism. While Kraidy’s observations about various elements of the show are always illuminating, her conclusions depend on assumptions that particular textual elements *will* provoke viewers to do or to think or to value something specific, a dubious proposition on which to build an interpretation. But, even if critics were to translate such textual analysis into descriptions of implied readers or viewers, our conclusions can only specify what the show *sets out* to do, how it *asks* to be decoded, whom it *seeks* to address, but not whether actual readers or viewers *do* accept these invitations. If we are interested in thinking about the ways in which texts ignite processes of social and political change, however, the question of how actual readers take up the roles offered to them remains a pressing one. To use the terms of Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in addition to studying “the representations of a society, on the one hand, and its modes of behavior, on the other,” critics of popular culture need to study “the use to which [representations of society] are put by groups or individuals” (xii).

For de Certeau, whose book was published in English in 1984, the “‘making’ in question” was “a hidden one,” since the expansion of systems of cultural production (such as television) left few places for “consumers” to “indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of these systems” (xii). For

this reason, he sought ways of reading such everyday activities as walking in the city as evidence of people's interpretations of and resistances to the systems in which they were enmeshed. In the digital age, however, cultural critics have a new resource for considering "what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does'" with the images presented to him or her by systems of cultural production (xii). That resource is the transformative works that circulate on the Internet.¹ In the case of *Sesame Street*, there are dozens of imitations, parodies, remixes, mash-ups, repurposings, and memes based on the show and available through such sites as YouTube. Studying these reworked texts should tell us something about the reception of *Sesame Street*, the uptake or refusal by its viewers of the social understandings the show sets out to promote.

For example, Brian Sack's variety comedy program (entitled *The B. S. of A.*, a title derived from Sack's book *The B. S. of A.: A Primer in Politics for the Incredibly Disenchanted*), which has aired on the Blaze television network in the United States since 2011, regularly features sketches entitled *Pumpnickel Boulevard*, an obvious parody of *Sesame Street*, a show with which Sack has said he had "a long-term childhood relationship" ("Me"). The first of these segments (a three-and-a-half-minute sketch that aired in November 2011)² begins with Sack (who typically plays the straight man in these sketches, a style common to many of the adult human characters on *Sesame Street*) trying to engage

Bucky, a Muppet-like puppet, in a conversation about the number nine and, using the example of a purchase he has just completed at the neighbourhood General Store, to demonstrate how it can be derived by taking three from twelve. Bucky refuses to be engaged on Sack's terms, however, observing that, given the extent of poverty in the world, perhaps it was irresponsible to buy the items at all rather than to give the money to someone less fortunate. As Sack tries to steer the conversation back on track by repeating the equation $12 - 3 = 9$, another puppet, Pepito, pops up: Pepito, Bucky explains, is an "anchor baby," his birth strategically orchestrated by his illegal-immigrant parents in order to make it more problematic for the nation to deport them, since babies born on American soil are entitled to American citizenship. Sack tries again to return to the script, this time by spelling the number nine, a cue for the appearance of a puppet representing an indigenous character who notes that nine is the number of members left in his tribe after the decimations they have suffered at the hands of a colonialist regime. Sack pleads for everyone to "stick to the basics" and to "focus on education," but the streetscape now becomes crowded as the word "education" signals the appearance of Lexie, a teacher puppet disgruntled by government cutbacks but unable to mount a credible resistance to them because she cannot read the language of her contract. All of the puppets agree with Bucky (who has taken

over the position of power from Sack by this point) that “nine” is an interesting number because it rhymes with “Free Palestine.” Sack tries to save the segment by trotting out the closing commercial reminder that *Pumpnickel Boulevard* has been brought to viewers by the number nine and the letter O, but even this wrap-up is unravelled as the puppet characters wonder whether the letter O stands for “Obama.” “Just the letter, no message,” a frustrated Sack fumes, but the puppets now disregard him entirely as Corey, the gender-ambiguous store owner, arrives to complain about the trouble s/he is having in renegotiating her/his mortgage, prompting a discussion about evil bankers. The segment ends with a group chant of “Kill, kill, kill” as Sack flees the stage.

The overt intention of the episode is to point to the limitations and contradictions of the “politically correct” view of the world represented by Bucky and his puppet friends, and, by extension, to the limitations and contradictions of the “sunny” world of *Sesame Street*. Clearly, too, there are elements here that are unlikely to appear on an episode of *Sesame Street*: the explicit references to contemporary political events such as national cutbacks to education and the movement to support the establishment of a Palestinian state; the commentary on the condition of the economy, in the reference to endemic poverty and the grasping behaviour of bankers; and the acknowledgement of the precariousness of the population of illegal immigrants in the USA.

But perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of the *B. S. of A.* sketch is how fully it has absorbed the textual strategies of the property on which it is poaching (to use one of de Certeau’s resonant metaphors).³ Like the Muppet Ernie often does in *Sesame Street*, Bucky and his fellow puppets use the polysemous nature of language to shift conversations from one semantic register to another: “education,” for example, is not only the process by which an individual learner comes to recognize conventional meaning but also the name of a system that employs and exploits workers (some of whom are unqualified for the authoritative positions they hold as teachers), and “nine” is not only what remains when three is taken from twelve but also a number that indexes the effect of genocidal nation-building practices. Like the “chaotic” Muppets on *Sesame Street* who stage otherness through a “productive” profusion of colour, form, size, and texture (Cooper 44, 45), Pepito, Lexie, and the unnamed indigenous puppet are not readily fixed in terms of their ages, races, or species. The gender-ambiguous store owner, who is a regular figure on these segments, embodies the value of category crossing, as does the cross-linguistic friendship of Bucky and Pepito. Also like the text on which it poaches, the *Pumpnickel Boulevard* segment “generates a plurality of truths” from its “distribution of . . . teaching authority” (Kraidy 20): the truth of Mr. Sack’s demonstration of subtraction is not overturned in the episode, but the truths generated

by Bucky and his fellow puppets who point to other social and political operations take precedence gradually over the “basics” to which Sacks would prefer to confine his putative audience. Notably, the collaborative model used by CTW to develop *Sesame Street* in the first instance was one in which authority circulated among expert theorists, concerned parents, experienced producers, empirical researchers, and the audience of children who were observed and interviewed, so that this characteristic can be seen as predicted by the “core principle” articulated by Cooney from the beginning. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, not only is what Heidi Louise Cooper has described as the “usefully messy” approach to multicultural community in *Sesame Street* repeated in *Pumpnickel Boulevard*, but so too is confidence in the durability of this community: Mr. Sack’s friendship with Bucky persists in episode after episode despite the fact that the two typically take very different—even oppositional—points of view on every topic under discussion.

In other words, the producers of *Pumpnickel Boulevard* have insinuated themselves into the *Sesame Street* text, thereby making the text “habitable” for themselves (de Certeau xxi). But encouraging participation rather than passivity in deciding the “right answers” was itself always an overall strategy of the CTW producers, a strategy that was perhaps most obvious in the recurring classification game,

“One of These Things Is Not Like the Others.”⁴ Many of the transformative texts that reference, rework, and recirculate *Sesame Street* seem to be variations on this practice of inhabiting rather than overturning the precursor text, from texts that use puppets representing sexually transmitted diseases (ostensibly to teach young viewers about safe sex) to texts that show the effects of the 2008 economic downturn on *Sesame Street* characters, to texts that Photoshop Muppets into images of the Occupy movement.⁵ Such texts make visible some of the absences in the representations of *Sesame Street* but also imply that the values and meanings they set into motion are already embedded in the show. In his early study of television as a cultural form, Raymond Williams identified *Sesame Street* as one of the shows that pioneered “new forms” made possible by the new technology (72). Characterizing the show as mobile and fast moving, he also observed that “the central continuities” of the show were “a kind of eager openness, a sympathetic curiosity” that could be seen as a “social use of some of the intrinsic properties of television” (76). To return to the questions that motivated this exploration, my provisional conclusion would be that the most interesting lines of interpretation to follow would be to read *Sesame Street* as an opportunity to elaborate and experiment upon what Jameson calls “new wish images of the social” (16). Indeed, having discussed both the argument that understands utopian writing to be an avoidance of the political and the



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argument that takes it to be a political offer to imagine alternate systems, Jameson speculates that “the most reliable political test lies not in any judgment on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new [works], Utopian visions that include those of the past, and modify or correct them” (xv). On this score alone, *Sesame Street* ought surely to be seen as a political project.

In their book about utopian transformations in contemporary children’s literature, Clare Bradford and her colleagues observe that, “since 1990, utopian imaginings have been largely supplanted by dystopian visions of dysfunctional, regressive, and often violent communities” in texts for young people (107). The conceptualizations of and patterns for *Sesame Street* were set in place more than two decades earlier, during a period of societal upheaval and societal hope that change was possible. But the transformative texts I have been considering were all produced in the period after 2005, and, while these texts often depict violence, report dysfunctional relationships, and reference regressive rather than progressive political events, they cannot be said to supplant the utopian imaginings of the children’s television show with a dystopian vision. The Street assumed in most of these texts remains a remarkably resilient community of friends.

Of course, most of these transformative texts are not directed specifically to young people nor are they always created by young people: children who first watched the show in 1969 would have been at least thirty-six years of age in 2005. This brief look into *Sesame Street* and the texts that seek to make *Sesame Street* habitable, in fact, raises the question for me of how we as critics might build into our analyses a much fuller view of reader response. We might, for example, begin to theorize *belated response* as a

relevant resource for thinking through the question of the work of cultural productions for young people. The case of *Sesame Street* would suggest that series texts, which are prime examples of texts that are structured as repetitions with variations and whose presence in the lives of their readers and viewers is likely to be of long duration, might be productive sites at which to investigate such belatedness.

While none of the five scholarly articles that appear in this issue of *Jeunesse* addresses the question of belated response, three of them discuss series texts and, in the course of making their arguments, the authors reveal many of the ways in which redundancy, repetition, and variation are assumed and utilized in this textual mode. In her essay, Cheryl Cowdy compares a recent example of a Canadian adventure novel, Richard Scrimger's *Into the Ravine*, with a nineteenth-century predecessor, one of James De Mille's books from his B. O. W. C. series of boys' adventure stories. Cowdy demonstrates that the adventure genre—a gendered form clearly built on recurrent patterns of plot, character, and theme—participates in the production and reproduction of foundational discourses that define and naturalize gender-, race-, and class-based hierarchies and inequities in Canadian society. In both the past and the present examples of the genre, it is ironically in the spaces in which they play that the boys of these stories are disciplined to accept the terms of the adult world they will enter.

Play is key to the origin of the three British series that Michelle Beissel Heath discusses in her essay: Florence Upton and Bertha Upton's Dutch Doll and Golliwogg books, Enid Blyton's initial Noddy books, and Allan Ahlberg's Happy Families series were all inspired by playthings encountered by the authors and in turn inspired the production of further goods. Heath uses the connections among the series to consider the imbrication of rights discourses and consumerism in the production of the idea of the child as a national citizen. She finds, perhaps surprisingly, that the agency of the child stand-ins in these series narrows from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century.

Like Heath, Caroline E. Jones is interested in the question of the agency accorded to youthful characters in series directed to young people: her focus is on three purportedly feminist television series produced in the United States between 1997 and 2007 and featuring teenage girls as lead characters. In her article, Jones observes that the three popular shows undertake the same cultural work: while all of the series challenge societal ideologies that reify virginity for teenage girls, they also punish the female characters who engage in sexual activity. Jones concludes by noting that these series continue to circulate through various subscription services, presumably because they continue to work with contemporary viewers. Although it is not the focus of her essay, her conclusion points to another sense in which reception of and response to texts can be belated.

The article by Helene Staveley is not concerned with series texts but with a repeated motif in a national literature. Staveley studies the secondary characters of children's books by Canadian writers Thomas King, Mordecai Richler, and Margaret Atwood, finding that it is through these characters, whose points of view readers are not invited to adopt, that the distortion effected by the interpellative processes of dominant ideology is recognized. Crossing multiple boundaries as they interrogate authenticity and legitimacy, the secondary characters create alternate possible worlds as they travel, becoming quixotic characters in the tradition that Miguel de Cervantes established with Don Quixote centuries ago.

Kevin Mitchell in his essay studies a text that is centrally concerned with the distortions effected by dominant ideology. Using the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze—in particular, Deleuze's work with the concepts of repetition and difference—to read the novel and the film *Fight Club*, Mitchell finds that there are two kinds of repetition operating in the text: the apparent repetition of the same in the “daily grind” lived through by the narrator and the repetition with a difference that is the anarchist Tyler Durden. Having worked through the implication of these two types of repetition in Deleuzian terms, Mitchell concludes with the proposition that Deleuze's privileging of repetition with a difference could also be the basis for a theory of interpreting series texts. Rather than reading for pattern,

he suggests, a reader might approach series texts as intratextual and intertextual lines of flight that open up both text and reader to the potential for something new to arise.

Questions of the same and the new inform all of the review essays in this issue. In a wide-ranging retrospective review written in the wake of the restructuring of the Vancouver firm of Douglas & McIntyre after their filing for bankruptcy protection in 2012, Judith Saltman celebrates the innovative work for young people published by the company since the 1970s. In Saltman's view, the achievements of the company have been fuelled in part by their decision to publish only titles that foreground the specificity of regional West-Coast identities. Heather Milne, reviewing four narratives about gay teens published in Canada recently, is disappointed by the extent to which the narratives privilege middle-class young people from stable homes and rely on the myth that queer subjects find comfort, community, and a sense of self only in urban environments.

The three reviews that address critical and scholarly studies also weigh the extent to which these studies repeat established conclusions and the extent to which they offer openings to new ways of thinking about young people's texts and cultures. Paul Tiessen reviews a collection of essays edited by Benjamin Lefebvre on the topic of adaptation studies and children's literature. (Lefebvre, who is copy editor of this journal, has had

no part in editing this review.) As conceptualized by Lefebvre and his contributors, principally through the work of Linda Hutcheon, adaptation is itself a form of repetition, but a form that does not necessarily repeat a precursor text faithfully, an insight that they use to illuminate a range of texts directed to young people. Perry Nodelman, reviewing a group of recent resource collections in the field, regrets the fact that, collectively, these resources seem to him to have the effect of ensuring that the study of children's literature is made "a very safe and quite harmless area of study" (160). Among his complaints is the general indifference of literary critics to the concerns of young people themselves, and, for the most part, to the concerns of parents, teachers, librarians, and children's book editors. In her review of Robin Bernstein's recent study of the construction of American childhood from slavery to civil rights entitled *Racial Innocence*, Jenny Wills concludes that Bernstein's study matters on many levels: not only does Bernstein provide a theoretically sophisticated and historically grounded reading of the ways in which

sentimental narratives of childhood innocence are distributed along a colour line in American history, with the juvenile of colour typically "empty of innocence," but also she offers a new vocabulary and method for reading what she calls "scriptive things," the artifacts of daily life that ask us to perform cultural beliefs in ways that contribute to the replication of dominant narratives.

For some time now, many of us who are scholars and critics of young people's texts and cultures have considered it among our most important objectives to learn to read the ways in which we are all conscripted into cultural norms and, in our roles as teachers, to demonstrate to young people the ways in which they, too, are being solicited to acquiesce to these norms by the texts and objects of material cultures that surround them. Is it possible, though, that, in our concern to develop critical practices and critical readers, we have forgotten to learn and to teach the courage needed to conceive of alternate systems? What might a scholarship and a pedagogy that committed itself to creating the conditions for the emergence of the new look like?

Notes

¹ Lev Manovich considers the ways in which de Certeau's vocabulary of strategies and tactics continues to provide "an excellent intellectual paradigm for thinking about vernacular culture," and the ways in which digital texts require a rethinking of his terms (9).

² This first segment is untitled but can be found at <<http://youtu.be/lRxe2quaqaik>>, along with a number of additional *Pumpernickel Boulevard* sketches.

³ In a 2007 mock filing of a legal complaint, Sack stipulates that he had "a long-term childhood relationship with Sesame Street, fond memories of Sesame Street, and considered Sesame Street a friend," before going on to complain about his experience at the

Langhorne, Pennsylvania amusement park Sesame Place ("Me"). Sack's satirical lawsuit points to a question I do not explore in this essay, that of whether and how the extension of *Sesame Street* into a commercial brand has shifted the meanings or the work of the text.

⁴ For a discussion of the development of this segment in relation to principles of active learning, see Morrow 62–63.

⁵ See the recurrent sketches on *Mad TV* between 2005 and 2009 and the Occupy Sesame Street meme started via Twitter in September 2011 by Brooklyn-based design studio Demo <<http://occupysesamestreet.org>> for these texts.

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