Muppets Abroad: Globalization of Multiculturalism and the International Co-Productions of Sesame Street

Julianna Carlson Palm
Loyola University Chicago

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MUPPETS ABROAD:
GLOBALIZATION OF MULTICULTURALISM AND
THE INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTIONS OF SESAME STREET

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY
JULIANNA C. PALM
CHICAGO, IL
AUGUST 2012
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ABSTRACT

In recent years globalization has been cited as the cause or force changing our world, making it more interdependent and “smaller” through new means of technology and communication. As such a force, globalization is seen as pervasive in all aspects of contemporary life. Sesame Street has been used as an educational tool in the United States since 1969 and since that time, the producers of the program have created a presence in various countries throughout the world, using the technology of television to communicate with preschool audiences. In particular in the last decade, new productions have begun and been funded by international development organizations in countries considered post-conflict. These areas are considered post-conflict as they have experienced or are experiencing recent conflict between two or more groups of people and the aims of Sesame Street in these co-productions are termed pro-social in that the curriculum of the productions aims to promote understanding and deconstruct stereotypes within the preschool audience. Sesame Street is a touchstone linking many issues from the globalization of multiculturalism, media and visual culture, to international development. The aims of Sesame Street have grown and changed from concentrating on promoting literacy and numeracy skills in preschool children in America to promoting pro-social aims in post-conflict areas around the world in their international co-productions (Cole et al, 2008). These co-productions represent an intersection of forces of globalization, local educational goals, visual culture and political intentions. In picking apart these intersecting threads, the question emerges of how these international co-
productions of Sesame Street, especially those with explicit pro-social goals in post-conflict areas, play a role in visually constructing views of multiculturalism, identity and education on a global stage.
Statement of Problem

Theories of Globalization

It can be argued that globalization has yet to have a nominal definition and that it is a term whose definition shifts depending on the semantic field in which it is being used (Amos et al, 2002). Yet for the purposes of this paper, globalization marks the world-spanning intensification of social processes, communication and economic interpenetration (Amos et al, 2002 and Caruso, 2008). Globalization theories that posit the rise of a ‘world polity’ or ‘world culture’ as espoused by Meyer, Ramirez and Boli, focus on the cultural character of media, the cultural scripts that are embedded in forms of communication and spreading institutional isomorphism (Caruso, 2008). This theory of globalization points to the increasing homogenization of all polities due to many forces but highlighting the role of international organizations and the normative pressure exerted by them. Using this focus on international organizations and the patterning of knowledge and meaning by cultural scripts as a starting point, this paper will use the ‘world polity’ globalization theory to see if and how Sesame Street has become a vehicle for globalization, what cultural scripts are being promoted and how local actors interact with Sesame Street.

Television

Television has the ability to transport, show people and places far beyond one’s borders. With this transportation, comes the immediate shared experience television.
provides an audience watching the same thing on television, the graphic nature of television lending this shared experience greater impact (Lesser, 1974). This visual ‘universal sharing’ Gerald Lesser points out, is unique to the television age. Television and the flows of communication media in the past few decades have mostly been viewed as hegemonic and coming from the West, specifically the United States (McNeely, 1989). Yet closer analysis has shown international television flows to be more highly differentiated and autonomous of cultural forces than often thought and the co-productions of such American exports such as Sesame Street illustrate this point. These co-productions start with the concept of television aiding the teaching of a preschool audience to be ready for schooling as well as participation in a more specific local context. This focus on preparing children for school was born with the American version of Sesame Street in 1969 (Lesser, 1974; Steemers, 2010; Lemish, 2007). Yet from this starting concept local actors have created location specific versions.

Sesame Street also represents a form of television programming born from the desire to create television for children, specifically preschool children under the age of six, as a specially recognized audience with distinctive characteristics and educational needs (Steemers, 2010). Despite the recognition of preschool children as a special audience, children’s television is not created by children but by adults and is therefore inexorably entwined with adult interests, desires and the cultural and institutional contexts in which the programming is conceived (Buckingham, 2007). This cultural and institutional context is of special interest when programming is borrowed across international borders and consciously re-contextualized to reflect these adult desires and curriculum aims. Television has become an almost universal form of media in
households, with the exception of very remote and isolated communities (Selznick, 2008). This raises the issue of media access for many communities as well as the effect of cultural communication standardization by such organizations as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the specialized technological needs which dictate forms of communication (McNeely, 1989). Television has also become a resource for audiences to construct identity, as it is active appropriated and deployed by audiences (Barker, 1999). As television is globalized, the question of how social identity is constructed through television programming begs examination.

The diffusion of television as a form of communication and the increase in access to television has led to conceptualizing television as a means of education to reach a broad audience especially for the preschool audience. This is because preschool television has historically been seen as motivated by developmental concerns versus market concerns (Steemers, 2010). In fact many broadcasters, especially foreign broadcasters, view children’s programming as a public good and therefore hold that state-supported broadcasting is justified (Gettas, 1992). This participation of national broadcasters in the dissemination of the co-productions of Sesame Street reinforces the link between national policy, curricular goals and the programming. Television programming such as Sesame Street is deployed to a mass audience to prepare them for mass schooling within national contexts. This link to schooling and education policy also links the co-productions of Sesame Street to the contradictions inherent in mass schooling between equity in education and differences in social identity (Sutton, 2005).
Visual Culture

Another angle to approach globalization, which is helpful in framing the subject of the international co-productions of Sesame Street, is that of Appadurai’s exploration of conceptualizing globalization as various scapes, one of which is mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996). Appadurai’s conception of the mediascape encompasses image-centered and narrative based accounts of bits of reality, which help to create scripts of imagined lives (Appadurai, 1996). Sesame Street falls into this idea of mediascapes in that these co-productions are created through images, stories and live-action modeling, helping to constitute an audiences’ self-narrative as well as a narrative of the ‘Other’ through visual based television. Visual culture, or as Lemish discusses, screen culture is an increasing presence in children’s lives throughout the world, both at home and in school settings (Lemish, 2007). Visual culture is the visual construction of the social (Mitchell, 2002). Using this presence and prominence in children’s lives, Sesame Street is an example of attempting to harness the media and how it relates to shaping narratives of identity and behavior for educational purposes. The interplays of identity and a globalized sense of multiculturalism are set against the backdrop of political and international development interests in certain areas of the world where the co-productions of Sesame Street have been promoted.

Sesame Street Co-Productions History

Sesame Street became an idea 1966, as the joint effort between a producer, Joan Clooney, and a foundation executive, Lloyd Morrisett, to harness the television viewing habits of children into a learning experience (Lesser, 1974). One of the original goals for Sesame Street was to help provide another option for education to take place outside of
the school and classroom. From this premise, the experiment of harnessing television
for the purposes of education arose. Sesame Street first aired in the United States in 1969
and that same year the Children’s Television Workshop (CTW) began to receive requests
to air the show internationally and in turn requests to change linguistic and curricular
details of the show. These requests forced CTW to create standards for adapting Sesame
Street abroad and in 1970 an International Division of Sesame Workshop established a
model to address these standards (Gettas, 1992; Moran, 2006). The model that CTW
created focused on the goals of maintaining the program as commercial free, protecting
CTW’s proprietary interests of production standards, and creating local educational
committees to approve adaptations to host country values and traditions (Gettas, 1992).
The flexibility of Sesame Street to adapt to various settings and cultural goals is
attributed to this CTW model.

The difference between international adaptations of Sesame Street, such as the
German version which premiered in 1971, and the current wave of co-productions, is that
co-productions include half dubbed material culled from the American version and half
from material produced on-site of live-action segments, animated segments, and studio
sequences (Gettas, 1992). Compared to earlier international adaptations which focused on
reformatting material from the American Sesame Street into the host countries language
and approving material for local curriculum goals, more current co-productions involve
the process of creating productions with localized settings, characters and on-site
production (Gettas, 1992). The first version of this type of co-production began with
Plaza Sesamo in 1972, produced in Mexico with the goal of creating a Sesame Street
version which could be aired all over Latin America. A Mexican board of advisors was
put together and later included a larger representation of Latin American educators and child-development specialists to set curriculum goals for the new co-production and to approve segments taken from the American version. A distinctive Latin American set was created, new music was written and new puppets were conceived and operated by Mexican puppeteers trained by CTW to make Plaza Sesamo distinctively Latin American (Gettas, 1992). This format was later expanded as it was applied to other locations and in 1987 greater creative freedom for host countries was expanded when Gregory Gettas became head of the international division of Sesame Workshop (Moran, 2006). This blueprint for co-productions is important to understand in examining how the visual and curricular content for each version is created.

What is not highlighted by Gettas’ history of the co-production process is the part international funding partners play in how co-productions are created. For example the Xerox Corporation and Ford foundation both funded Plaza Sesamo as it was designed and produced in Mexico (Mayo et al., 1984). The funding was vital to the co-production getting off the ground but also visual situated the program with a Xerox logo at the beginning and end of each episode. Earlier co-productions such as Plaza Sesamo differ in funding partners from more recent co-productions in post-conflict areas in that international organizations such as UNESCO and USAID provide funding for many of the newest versions of Sesame Street abroad. Currently co-productions receive funding from corporate sponsors, non-profit sponsors and governmental sponsors. For example, the major sponsors for the co-production Kilimani Sesame in Tanzania are the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Mattel Inc., and Freedom to Create (sesameworkshop.org, 2012). The role of sponsors for international co-
productions of Sesame Street comes into play in examining what visual stamps are on the co-productions as they air in host countries and what implicit message is sent through such imagery of the directionality of television flows.

Multiculturalism

Yet the discourse of globalization is not isolated from other discourses. Another discourse that arises in examining the international co-productions of Sesame Street is that of multiculturalism, as the management of diversity becomes a key contemporary challenge, this challenge is reflected on the Sesame Street screen (Banerjee, 2001). The American Sesame Street consciously placed special importance on diversity in the cast of “real” people in terms of age, gender, race and even disability (Kraidy, 2002). This decision points to the value Sesame Workshop placed on creating a visual representation of diversity to allow their preschool audience to construct meanings of difference with what they saw on the screen.

The argument of the emergence of a global culture is in debate, and often-transnational processes are seen as reinforcing local ethnicity and nationalities versus creating a global culture, but these ethnicities are reconstructed and managed through the circulation, appropriation and manipulation of images of contemporary culture (Smith 1990; Banerjee, 2001). Multiculturalism arose as a discourse in the latter part of the twentieth century to manage the consequences of immigration and cultural diversity in a way which would allow for the smooth functioning of society, by attempting to balance the identities of various groups against the question of equity (Banerjee, 2001; Taylor, 1994; Sutton 2005). This balancing act can been seen in the co-productions of Sesame Street in post-conflict areas as the identities of formerly antagonistic and co-existing
ethnic groups are consciously depicted.

The crux of multiculturalism is to celebrate individual and group differences yet this lies in tension with the universals of globalization. Is multiculturalism another script in global culture? Are the international co-productions of Sesame Street perpetuating that script? Much of the research conducted on the suitability of Sesame Street as an influence on social and cultural actions has focused on its international co-productions (Kraidy, 2002). This points to the specific focus of these international co-productions on social and cultural behaviors versus academic goals and how an educational tool such as Sesame Street is seen as influencing the ways in which its preschool audience constructs their understandings of identity and their socio-cultural environment (Kraidy, 2002).

Multiculturalism has increasingly become internationalized and a global diffusion has occurred of both the political discourse of multiculturalism and the codification surrounding the relations inherent in multiculturalism (Kymilcka, 2007). This diffusion is reflected in the global discourse surrounding education and the recognition of diversity that accompanies discussions of mass education policy. As Sutton points out, the late twentieth century changed the face of diversity around the world as migration of people across national borders and ideas communicated across borders increased (Sutton, 2005).

Multiculturalism on this global stage plays into world culture theory in that multiculturalism can be seen as part of the increasing distribution of scripts throughout the world, which reinforce legitimate national and sub-national collective identities (Ramirez, 2009). Ramirez points to the valorization of diversity as changing how educational curricula embrace diversity as part of the script for a model nation-state.

This valorization this is important to note in looking at Sesame Street as an expression of
a particular form of globalized multiculturalism.

**Literature Review**

**Political Nature of Sesame Street Co-Productions**

Education is inherently political (Miletta, 2006). As an educational tool, the international co-productions of Sesame Street are certainly no exception. As Gutmann points out, much of multiculturalism is about the politics of recognition and how individuals of different cultural identities are recognized as equal (Gutmann, 1994; Ramirez, 2009). The intertwining of politics in the flows of children’s television, specifically the co-production of Sesame Street can be seen in the use of national broadcasting networks abroad, the curriculum goals, adaptions to national policy agendas and the sources of funding.

One of the clearest examples of the political nature of the use of educational television can be seen in Cole, et al’s study of *Rechov Sumsum* and *Shara’a Simsim* in Israel and Palestine (Cole, 2003). The aim of this bilingual Sesame Street series developed in the mid 1990s was to target social judgments in preschool children with the specific goal of promoting inter-cultural understanding and peace on a person-to-person level. Cole et al conducted pretests and post-tests from viewing *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim* analyzing the use of negative attributes in describing the other culture, the use of stereotypes in conflict resolution and the recognition of cultural symbols (Cole, 2003). The results of this study displayed that even as young as preschool, children in the Middle East region could develop negative stereotypes of the ‘Other’, and that across the four months of exposure to *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim* the children displayed changes in how they used negative stereotypes, choices in conflict resolution and
identification of shared cultural symbols (Cole, 2003). Cole et al’s study shows the explicitly pro-social goals of the programming for *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsims* motivated by divisive politics between Israel and Palestine, as well as the limited success of those goals. The aims of these co-productions differ from aim of their American counterpart, in that the negotiation of identity for the audience in relation to difference or the ‘Other’ becomes a focus ahead of school readiness. As multiculturalism is the politics of recognition and identity, the pointed interaction of groups who see each other as the ‘Other’ in the Sesame Street context is a political move as much as it is an educational one. Unfortunately the joint co-production of Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsims crumbled along with political relations between Israel and Palestine in 2000.

The international political nature of Sesame Street’s co-productions is also reflected through the funding sources for Sesame Street’s international television programming. For example Sesame Street’s co-production in Kosovo is funded through partnerships with Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (IFA), Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), UNICEF United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This list of development agencies highlights the ways in which the co-productions of Sesame Street are part of international development and the common global networks of the United Nations, Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and The World Bank (Spring, 2009). Spring outlines the links from these intergovernmental organizations to both the television and online programming of Sesame Street and poses the question of if these connections and
the stated goals of the programming are contributing to a common definition of world culture (Spring, 2009).

The Effectiveness of Sesame Street Programming

The impact of television as influencing children’s learning and behavior has been thoroughly studied, especially in the case of the original Sesame Street as one of the most researched shows in television history (Palmer, 1976). Many studies (see Clifford et al. 1995; Fisch and Truglio, 2001) have concluded that television can be a powerful educational tool when used effectively (Moran, 2006). In a similar vein Shalom Fisch points to the ways in which Sesame Street has been studied in international adaptations, though not specifically post-conflict areas, to show positive differences in cognitive skills for children viewing in Mexico, Turkey, Portugal, and Russia (Fisch, 2009). Dafna Lemish also highlights the ways in which the Sesame Street co-productions have been used to show that television can be harnessed to promote peace initiatives and challenge negative stereotypes (Lemish, 2007). Though what is interesting to note is that Sesame Workshop and its affiliates have sponsored the majority of studies on the social and cultural effectiveness of Sesame Street’s international co-productions.

Local versus Global

Sesame Street’s portrayal of diversity is related to the programs ability to interrogate locality while constructing meaning in situating social practices and intelligibility (Kraidy, 2002). The question of the negotiation of the local and the global arises in Kristin Moran’s work on the co-production of Sesame Street in Spain. Though Spain is not considered a post-conflict area such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, or Palestine/Israel, the case study she presents helps point to the forces of globalization
involved in the process of creating a Sesame Street co-production (Moran, 2006). According to Moran the utilization of Spanish producers, scriptwriters and set designs invariably made the co-production appropriate for Spanish children and representative of Spanish identity. Interestingly, much like the beginnings of the American Sesame Street, a conscious effort was made to create characters representing various ethnic identities in Spanish culture, such as a Gypsy character, an Egyptian and Moroccan character, etc. (Moran, 2006). This conscious multicultural move highlights the need to look at the multicultural aspect of the Sesame Street co-productions and how they fit into theories of globalization.

Gettas traces the development of Sesame Street’s international co-productions from the perspective of a producer and why the curricular goals of co-productions have been different from their American counter parts, as school-readiness means different things in different cultures and differing social values spawn differing curriculum goals (Gettas, 1992). As a producer Gettas also emphasizes the model used by CTW as a means for Sesame Workshop to keep the ‘branding’ of Sesame consistent. Both local and global goals are present in the process of creating a co-production. Curriculum aims, representation of local settings, language and traditions become integral parts of co-productions but as part of the CTW process training, orientations and consults are provided to host countries. This part of the process is to promote self-sufficiency at the local level and to maintain a certain level of production quality for Sesame Street (Gettas, 1992). As local as the content of the co-production is, what is interesting to note is the standardization that is occurring of the technology and the educational television production through the direction from Sesame Workshop and the international
In examining the issue of international co-productions, Barbara Selznick offers an informative view of how international co-productions in general arose within the world of preschool television and how the co-productions of Sesame Street fit into conveying ideas of consumerism, citizenship and culture (Selznick, 2008). The format of a co-production started to be popularized when concerns of funding and production costs increased for many programs, especially as laws concerning content and funding shifted in the United States in the 1990’s to limit governmental funding and required a certain percentage of educational content in children’s television. This popularity resulted from the fact that co-productions cost less to produce but still produced high revenue. Though Sesame Street’s international co-productions took conscious steps to avoid the accusation of cultural imperialism and answered the requests to export the show internationally as part of a desire to spread the ‘brand message’, questions linger surrounding funding concerns and the use of the revenue generated by international co-productions (Selznick, 2008). Selznick shows the charge of cultural imperialism being turned on its head as the Mexican produced version of Sesame Street Plaza Sesamo was exported from Mexico to US Latino audiences in 1995, yet questions of how the co-production illustrates cultural difference versus ‘universal’ themes is still present in Selznick’s analysis (Selznick, 2008).

**Study Design and Research Question**

World culture theory posits that those who are engaged in policy formation are enactors of conventionalized scripts (Meyer et al, 1997). Educational policy is enacted through the curriculum goals and production of local versions of Sesame Street co-
productions, whether those goals are school readiness or ethnic tolerance. Thus it would follow that these productions may be enacting scripts of globalization of world culture. The following research question reflects the core of the analysis; do international co-productions of Sesame Street participate in globalizing scripts of multiculturalism? In other words to use Kraidy’s definition of multiculturalism, do the international co-productions provide their international preschool audiences in post-conflict areas with the visual images to engage in evaluating the relationship between difference and identity (Kraidy, 2002)?

In order to study how and if a globalized multiculturalism is portrayed in post-conflict international co-productions of Sesame Street, random episodes from four different co-productions were selected for viewing. The different co-productions being *Sesame Tree* from Northern Ireland, *Takalani Sesame* from South Africa, *Rechov Sumsum* from Israel and *Shara’a Sismim* from Palestine. These co-productions were chosen because they are produced in areas of the world considered post-conflict; they are series with at least two cycles of production and relative ease of access to episodes. The episodes were obtained with permission through the Sesame Workshop and all episodes viewed were aired in the years 2007 to 2009 on the broadcast networks BBC, SABC, ETV, and the Palestinian Maan Network. Fifteen episodes total were viewed from the above-mentioned co-productions. In viewing these episodes particular attention was focused on the visual aspects of setting, characters, people and context portrayed. Each episode was viewed with careful note taking to identify repeating themes and visual cues, as well as differences between casts, sets, locations and frequency of clips from the American version of Sesame Street. Textual analysis is used as this form of
methodology views meaning as socially produced through a text (Kraidy, 2002). The focus of the analysis is on the characters presented in episodes, the setting of each version, and the role Muppets play in construction of meaning and identity.

**Analysis Results**

**Ethnic Groups of Characters**

One of the conscious decisions on the part of the American Sesame Street from its inception was to use a multi-racial cast in an inner city setting. The ‘real’ people of the original US Sesame Street ranged from an African-American couple, a single white man and a Latino family. This special emphasis on multi-racial casting was part of the way Sesame Street allowed for interrogation of multicultural identity on the show. Therefore, in examining the international co-productions one of the first codes to look at was the representation of various ethnic groups in the live cast and live-action clips. The first observation was noticed in the Northern Irish program *Sesame Tree*. In season 1 episode 4, all of the children shown are white and of apparent Irish decent, the exceptions being the clips culled from the American version of Sesame Street. For example in *The Share Necessities* a clip depicts a pair of African American children playing on a playground to demonstrate friendship and sharing. The origin of this clip is pointed to by the use of the Internet by the Muppet monster character Potto to find the clip of Cookie Monster singing a song about sharing as the children play. This representation of children of a non-Irish ethnicity is framed by the American context. All of the children in the live-action clips filmed in Northern Ireland in the sample of *Sesame Tree* viewed were Caucasian. Interestingly adults in these live action clips have only background roles as chaperones or a teacher walking past but rarely speak. *Sesame Tree* differs from the
three other locations viewed in that the only characters that live in the Sesame Tree are Muppets and there are no ‘real’ people beyond the children who send in different pre-recorded video questions and the live-action segments which the Muppet hare character of Hilda will ‘meet’ out in the world.

*Takalani Sesame, Rechov SumSum and Shara’a Simsim* all film on sets which include both Muppet characters and ‘real’ people. Each human character on set for *Rechov SumSum* represent various ethnicities. There is a woman from Ethiopia, Russian, Jewish as well as Arab Israeli characters and Muppets that speak both Hebrew and Arabic. In one episode of *Rechov SumSum* in particular various contrasts are made between people and Muppets of different colors. For example the small purple Muppet Abigail wants to join a scene with Grover and another blue Muppet, Mahboub. At first Grover and Mahboub argue with Abigail and point to her purple color. After some discussion, the three Muppets sing together. In the scene following a song is sung while showing all the people of *Rechov SumSum* interacting, an Arab veterinarian with Jewish grandmother, Ethiopian gardener with Arabic singer, etc. This juxtaposition highlights the ethnicities of the characters, visually depicting various cultural identities on the screen. In comparison the Palestinian *Shara’a Simsim* features fewer live characters, with the fix-it man Salim being the only recurring live character. Other live actors are present for different segments in each episode but only Salim seems to ‘live’ on *Shara’a SimSim*. What is different especially in episode *Wadi* and *It’s Your Turn* of *Shara’a SimSim* is the way characters from *Shara’a Simsim* are shown interacting with the world and families outside *Shara’a Simsim*. All the ethnicities depicted on *Shara’a SimSim* seem to be Palestinian or Arab Israeli. No visual emphasis is made on having multiple
ethnicities represented, as is evidenced by having only Salim. Though in episode 7 of *Shara’a SimSim* after cleaning up after a storm, various ages and genders are represented cleaning up the aftermath.

Of all the international co-productions examined in this paper, *Takalani Sesame* was by far the most diverse. South Africa’s population contains many ethnic groups and that population reality is reflected in the cast of *Takalani* as well as the language. The human characters on Takalani include a South African family of Ma Dimpho and Salie that visually are of varying skin tones, though none are white. The various live action segments include children of both genders and children who visually appear to be of European, African and Indian descent. The majority of the live actors shown on Takalani are black, which reflects the racial reality of South Africa, though each shot of children in groups includes more than one ethnic group. For example, in episode 55 of season 5, a celebrity singer comes on the show to sing. He is black and the children in the scene listening are from all ethnic groups and genders. This careful selection of actors seems at pains to show all the various ethnic groups present in South Africa. The languages heard ranged from Venda, English, Afrikaans and Zulu and the program emphasizes the multilingual nature of the show featuring all eleven official languages at various points.

The racial make-up of the cast of these international co-productions is important to note because they are what children confront visually when they are viewing these productions. The representation of diverse racial groups in the co-productions is consistent with similar choice made by Sesame Street in choosing its original cast in 1969 (Kraidy, 2002). Though each co-production deals with that multicultural representation differently from framing it in American contexts on Sesame Tree to clearly choosing
character of each ethnicity on *Rechov Sumsum*. Multiculturalism allows for the engagement with locality through the production of meaning surrounding identity. Children viewing the international co-productions of Sesame Street see characters in the program of similar ethnic backgrounds as themselves reflected back to them on the television screen. How these images are being interpreted by children as they view them is not the subject of this paper, what is the subject is the presence of the visual images used in the programing that present multiculturalism as a value, the celebration of difference and tolerance as visually shown in the cast of the co-productions.

**Role of the Muppets**

Much as the diverse racial make up of the human cast of *Sesame Tree*, *Takalani Sesame*, *Rechov SumSum* and *Shara’a SimSim* is worth examining for the visual images they convey, the role of the Muppets is important to consider. The puppets make up the majority of screen time of any scene in the co-productions. From material used from the original *Sesame Street* to material shot live on location for each production, Muppets are the focus. The four co-productions researched have a variety of animals, monsters and human puppet characters. *Sesame Tree*’s main characters are Potto, a large purple monster, and Hilda, a brown hare and in the second season a red squirrel. Minor characters include puppet earthworms, berries and a red bird. *Takalani Sesame* features a giant yellow meerkat Moshe, a large blue monster Zikwe, a small purple monster ZuZu, a small bright yellow monster Kami and the red monster Elmo renamed Neno (see figure 1). *Rechov SumSum* stars a small purple monster Abigail, a large orange monster Brosh, a small blue monster Mahboub, a brown grouch Moishe and a humanoid Muppet Sivan in a wheelchair. Grover is also featured on the show but named Grover. *Shara’a SimSim*
has fewer starring Muppets, but features a green, purple and blue rooster Kareem and an orange monster Haneen.

The first observation of the muppet characters is that all the puppets conform to the Sesame Workshop aesthetic standard, from materials used to create the puppets to the large eyes, bulbous nose and other simple facial features. This aesthetic is part of the branding, which is part of the co-production process but also creates a shared experience of what children view around the world, a shared narrative. Also, the presence of American characters is interesting to note. Characters such as Elmo and Grover are depicted as South African or Israeli, but aesthetically are still the same characters as are shown in the American version of Sesame Street. Elmo and Grover are highlighted, as they are puppets that interact with the Muppets of specific co-productions versus only being dubbed in clips from the American production. This creates a strong connection to the original Sesame Street and again creates a global shared experience. The visual recognition of characters as coming from another production can be powerful. Take for example then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice very publically shaking hands with a life-size puppet of Elmo in Jakarta at an Islamic school (Powell, 2006). A successful co-production featuring Elmo is present in Indonesia and shaking hands with Elmo used that visual image of the character to connect with the audience of the program.

Visually the animal puppets are natural colors, brown, grey, red or white while monsters are more outlandish colors from orange to purple. This color scheme also applies to human puppet characters, which can have purple, orange, pink skin or any color in between. The bright colors of the puppets allow the Muppets to be interpreted as any race or nationality. Monster Muppets appeared to be the majority of the type of
Muppets created for the international co-productions, versus animals or humanoid. In viewing each episode, usually no more than three to four human characters appear in an episode, with the emphasis being on the Muppet characters and their problems. Though on average between all the co-productions viewed Muppet interaction scenes outnumbered human character interaction scenes. Though clips of ‘real’ people either culled from the American Sesame Street or shot off set made up about a third of each episode. The Muppets are key in locating how identity can be negotiated with what a preschooler sees on the screen. The conscious choice to have the Muppet monsters and humans appear in un-naturalistic colors blurs any attempt to categorize them into specific groups, opening up the door to individual interpretation the identity of the majority of the characters on the screen. The emphasis on diversity from Muppets to human characters reflects a desire to depict a multicultural ideal world and allow individual interrogation of locality and identity when viewing the program. The results of such studies as the one conducted by Cole et al. in 2003 on audiences of Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim point to ways this interrogation happens through viewing the program. The study examined the degree to which viewing Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim increased Israeli and Palestinian children’s cultural knowledge of one another and influenced peer conflict resolution. The program depicted not only the ‘Other’ but also aimed to promote positive self-image for the viewing audience, with the findings showing that allowing children to ‘find themselves’ in representations was key to changing perceptions and promoting pro-social behavior (Cole, 2008). Having a child ‘find themselves’ in the program and situate themselves in relation to an ‘Other’ through viewing the program supports the
interrogation of identity and locality through viewing the co-productions of Sesame Street.

Setting

The sets on which each co-production is filmed reflect bright colors, clean lines and simple shapes. The appeal of such a setting to young children is well researched and logical for television aimed at a preschool audience. Yet what is striking about all the sets are how idealized they are of the worlds they represent, from a bright, clean and orderly train station in Takalani Sesame, to a cozy tree in Sesame Tree, to a city street and park in Rechov SumSum and Shara’a SimSim. As Gerald Lesser points out, Sesame Street wished to present children with a vision of how the world might be. Sesame Street wished to create myths for children to live by (Lesser, 1974). These myths, as simple as showing kindness towards friends, become narratives to piece together into scripts of imagined lives, mediascapes of an ideal world. The world of the human characters, Muppets and even the children in the live-action clips, is one that is clean, straight forward and full of a vast variety of diversity. The celebration of this idealized myth is a shared aspect of the co-productions, which points to the wish to allow the children viewing to re-imagine a world from the ‘reality’ of their own. Showing a setting that is cleaner, kinder and displays the diversity in which they immediately live is a key aim of the Sesame Street co-productions (Cole et al, 2008). This goal is undertaken in order to rework children’s negative visions of the ‘Other’. Multiculturalism is represented in the juxtaposition of lived experience with the idealized Sesame world.
Conclusion

The Sesame Street co-productions make a conscious effort to give screen time to representations of various ethnic, gender and religious groups. An idealized world is represented of family, community and learning. Efforts to keep content and references culturally specific are clear in the setting, characters and language used by the characters. Yet what was similar across all the co-production episodes viewed was the use of a consciously diverse cast, Muppets as the majority of the show and an idealized setting. This points to an understanding of multiculturalism as allowing children to interrogate locality, difference and identity through what they see on screen. How or if multiculturalism is interpreted by the audience is beyond the scope of this paper. The co-productions also point to a shared understanding by the host countries of seeing a need for such programming. The worlds created through the co-productions, with the oversight of the Sesame Workshop, operate with the implicit understanding of the Child as part of a specialized preschool audience. The adoption of the Sesame co-productions in various developing countries as a tool of early education, points to a shared understanding of the target age group of Sesame Street as special. Visually the various international co-productions sampled point to a shared aesthetic that is locally adapted and the presence of multiculturalism as a valued script in the choice of cast, Muppets and setting. This study of the Sesame Street co-productions in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Israel and Palestine support Sutton and Ramirez’s views of the diffusion of multiculturalism in approaches to education as the issues of diversity and difference complicate how identity is constructed. Visual global culture is distributed through various media outlets but television is one of the most powerful means that gives audiences materials with which to
construct ideas of themselves as well as their surroundings (Barker, 1999). The international co-productions of Sesame Street offer preschool audiences visual representations of diversity through the shared experience of television. Similar to Kraidy’s findings, this study points to the ways Sesame Street international co-productions emphasize individuals, in the form of Muppets and characters, versus a majority. Factors of funding, politics, media and television flows all contribute to the shape of these international co-productions but they share a sense of who their audience is, the view of the preschool audience as needing the diversity of multiculturalism available as a means to construct identity. Though the limits of this study were access to episodes from other contexts and knowledge of all the languages of the co-productions to allow for analysis of narrative as well as visual aesthetics. Hopefully further study may shed more light on the ways multiculturalism and recognition of difference are globalized as programs such as these co-productions help create the myths future generations will live by one fuzzy, bright Muppet at a time.
APPENDIX A

LIST OF SESAME STREET CO-PRODUCTIONS, IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER


Another interesting note concerning American characters and Muppets, is this recent series *Shalom Sesame* co-production produced and filmed in Israel yet aimed at Jewish American audiences versus local Israelis. The series differs in many ways to the other co-productions as it goes straight to DVD and uses American actors and puppets, but as far as representing difference the series is consciously addressing the Jewish identity.
APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE SCREENSHOTS FROM EACH COPRODUCTION SERIES
Figure 1: Screenshot image from episode 9 *Takalani Sesame*

Figure 2: Screenshot image from episode 4 *Sesame Tree.*
Figure 3: Screenshot image from episode 30 *Rechov Sumsum*.

Figure 4: Screenshot image from episode 19 *Shara'a Simsim*.
Figure 5: Set shot of *Takalani Sesame* provided by Sesame Workshop.
REFERENCE LIST


VITA

Albany, New York was where Julianna Palm was born and raised. For her undergraduate career Julianna received her Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Anthropology at George Washington University, in 2004.

Before beginning graduate work in Cultural and Educational Policy Studies at Loyola University Chicago, Julianna taught English and Art with WorldTeach in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. This began her interest in visual global culture and art education. While attending Loyola, she also worked as an art teacher with Rogers Park Montessori School. This paper grew from an interest in the flows of ideas and practices, especially within the visual realm, around the world.

Currently Julianna lives in Chicago, Illinois and continues her Montessori teaching.