Reflective Essay

My final history class of my undergraduate career, HIST408: Social and Political Movements in the 1960s and 1970s, began on August 29, 2024 at 12:30. At 12:31, there was not one brain cell in my head that had a research idea for my senior thesis. At 3:00, class concluded. I was still clueless, but now I was also hungry because some higher power decided to schedule a class during peak lunchtime hours, and I was overwhelmed with the task ahead of me for the next twelve weeks. However, my professor, Dr. Katarina Keane, did what she does best at 3:01: know her students' individual passions, needs, and experiences. After collaborating with Dr. Keane in previous semesters, she knew I was a History and Secondary Social Studies Education double major, so she was aware of my logistical student-teaching commitment as well as my passion for education and learning. She shared with me that seven minutes away from where we were sitting in Taliaferro Hall was the Children's Television Workshop records in Hornbake Library's Special Collections, and in those records contained boxes of archival materials on the most famous public children's television show of all time, *Sesame Street* (1969). In a moment of pure honesty, I shared with Dr. Keane I had never watched an episode of *Sesame Street* growing up, which resulted in me learning the true meaning of flabbergasted that Thursday. Yet, I knew I had to get the neurons firing, so I walked into McKeldin Library the following week to find background Big Bird reading. I completed an initial WorldCat search with the term, "*Sesame Street,"* and after excluding any picture books, I found existing scholarship on the education impact of the show as well as several production histories.

After spending time annotating the secondary *Sesame Street* literature to see what others have already contributed to the field, I decided I would analyze sources from the CTW records to examine how Sesame *Street* supported teaching the whole child as a part of a growing 1970s

movement for early childhood education. I contacted University Archives Specialist Mike Henry, who took great interest in my work and helped me figure out the right boxes to request. When I arrived at the Reading Room, Mike made sure I had all my materials organized and informed me that going through eight cartons in three hours is an unimaginable feat. Blinded by optimistic nativity, I opened my first box to see file folders packed like sardines and immediately booked a second reading appointment. What I did not expect to find in those folders was thousands of letters written to *Sesame Street* from across the United States. These letters celebrated and criticized, congratulated and condemned, praised and protested every aspect of *Sesame Street,* and inspired me to shift my research in a different direction.

In the Special Collections reading room, I tried my best to quickly read each letter, make any important notes about impactful phrases, and then take a photo to review more closely later. This task, however, was one of my biggest research challenges. It was impossible to simply skim the letters because each letter was sent in by someone motivated enough to put pen to paper and pay for a stamp in the hopes that someone at *Sesame Street* would read their words, and that itself is meaningful. Something about a physical letter, a medium of communication on a rapid decline in the twenty-first century, represents the purest form of expressing one's opinion and I loved looking at every detail. After several visits to the reading room, I uploaded more than 1,500 letters, newspaper clips, birthday cards for Big Bird, and other primary source materials to Tropy, a program that allowed me to organize and annotate my photos based on topic. While evaluating these photos, I noticed that the overwhelming amount of letters were written by women and mothers. I focused on this group to reflect the gendered expectations that a woman in 1970 would be the one responsible for holding her child's favorite television show accountable. I also decided to concentrate on the criticism of the show, which ranged from people saying

Sesame Street promoted communist values to the show needed a Carrot Freak instead of a Cookie Monster. Narrowing my focus to letters around nutrition, breastfeeding, and gender roles, all topics women and mothers are uniquely positioned to comment on, I reflected these critiques onto the social battles of the 1970s around gender, feminism, and health.

The Children's Television Workshop records from Special Collections, various secondary literature on *Sesame Street*, nutrition, and 1970s feminism from McKeldin Library, and access to newspaper databases provided by University Libraries proved invaluable to my research process. Through this experience, I learned the value of a well-organized photo library as well as to lean on experts like Dr. Keane and Mike for support. As a social studies teacher, I not only got to expand my knowledge of 1970s American history but I also was reminded of the importance of civil discourse. These letters served as a way for ordinary Americans to assert their beliefs and attempt to change the world around them. Although people do not write as many letters as they used to, the value in expressing your opinion and advocating for change stands the test of time. I want my current and future students to understand the power of deliberating with people who share different attitudes, whether it is through a letter, a speech, a social media post, or a simple conversation. This idea of collaborating and compromising with others is a uniquely human experience, an experience championed by the tolerance and empathy on *Sesame Street*.