

Sarah Banet-Weiser, **Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship**, Duke University Press, 2007, 276 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

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Today, any distinction between politics and consumption is especially blurred. A number of countries — including Canada, Poland, and Germany — have even hired corporate branding companies to manage and control the image of their respective nations. Political choices are presented as consumer choices as politicians appear in popular media programs such as Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* to announce their candidacy and are promoted among other products as one of Oprah's "favorite things." The corollary to this phenomenon is the nationalizing of consumer choices and corporate brands. Especially since 9/11, products are advertised through strategic employments of patriotism; in one particular case, a children's network brands itself as a nation. In *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, Sarah Banet-Weiser examines the complex ways in which this network, Nickelodeon, interpolates its young viewers as consumer citizens. Yet, rather than lamenting the conflation between consumption and politics, as much scholarship on this topic does, Banet-Weiser argues that despite its commercialization, Nickelodeon actually "creates an environment where meaningful consumer citizenship is constituted" (p. 5). Further, she argues for a redefinition of the category of citizenship that accounts for the ways in which it is entwined with consumerism. Bracketing an analysis of whether this trend is beneficial to democracy or not, she unpacks this process in a wonderfully crafted case study of Nickelodeon from 1985 to 2005.

Children, Banet-Weiser notes, are not normally configured within political life, and yet, kids are often addressed as citizens within media contexts. Nickelodeon constitutes an interesting example: it drafted a "Declaration of Kids' Rights," airs a kids' news program which confronts political and social issues, conducted a "Kids Pick the President" mock election, and has branded itself "Nickelodeon Nation." Nickelodeon situates the child consumer citizenship in terms of "rights" and "empowerment." Given the three-fold status of the child consumer — as current purchasers, future purchasers, and influencers of family purchases — this strategy proves highly lucrative, but it is not only about the bottom line.

Kids Rule! offers an historical analysis that follows the network from its early start-up days when it had the luxury to experiment up to a point at which Nickelodeon was a global brand owned by one of the world's largest media giants, Viacom, drawing in \$3.9 billion for that parent company. Banet-Weiser draws from interviews with industry professionals and with children who watch the network, as well as providing textual and discursive analysis of the network and press coverage on Nickelodeon. Well-informed on the work of scholars who grapple with the increasing connections between political citizenship

and consumerism such as Lauren Berlant, Toby Miller, and Néstor Garcia Canclini, Banet-Weiser offers up a compelling argument to revisit conventional notions of citizenship. She urges her readers to consider the ways in which it is fraught with contradictions often inseparable from practices of consumption.

According to Banet-Weiser, it was Geraldine Laybourne, Nickelodeon's president from 1984 until 1996, who drafted a new paradigm for children's television. In the period of 1980s deregulation, when children's television often followed the toy-based model, appearing as a 30-minute commercial for licensed characters, or alternatively, the "green vegetable" model, meaning educational but dull, Laybourne, with almost-guru status, envisioned Nickelodeon presenting entertaining programming which would "respect" and entertain kids, all within a commercialized environment. Laybourne also broke with conventional definitions of the child: she understood the child as a citizen and a consumer, actively engaged in media; she publicly sought to "empower children" by giving them a place of their own. Laybourne set out to create a place "where a kid can be a kid," and non-coincidentally she also profited from that "place." In fact, Nickelodeon began to brand itself as a place "just for kids" by playing on a conventional binary that set children at odds with parents. But while convention defined adults as responsible and children as innocent and passive,, Nickelodeon painted adults as boring and predictable and characterized children as spontaneous and wacky. Employing this "Us" versus "Them" ideology, Nickelodeon made claims of empowering children as active participants in society and sophisticated media users. According to Banet-Weiser, Laybourne was successful on many fronts: she managed to resist hyper-commercialization by largely resisting producing toy-based programming; produced innovative, non-violent, non-stereotypical shows for kids; and developed an audience address that emphasized respect, not condescension. It is within this framework that Nickelodeon began to appeal to its viewers as citizens.

Banet-Weiser's study continues by examining the particular branding techniques of Nickelodeon from the Laybourne era and beyond. In 1990, Nickelodeon launched its "Nickelodeon Nation" campaign and began using the tag line: "We Pledge Allegiance to Kids" (p. 95). "Empowerment" became the key term within this branding discourse which interpolated the audience as citizens. This version of citizenship is garnered not through political action but through consumption; as Banet-Weiser notes, an "empowered" child equates to a "savvy consumer" (p. 76). While it may sound counter-intuitive to declare that choosing the "right" network and purchasing Nickelodeon merchandise could constitute anything like citizenship, Banet-Weiser notes that political citizenship is not often "pure" of economic or consumption aspects. That people understand political rhetoric is often due to their identities as consumers. Consumption is often seen as a kind of sign of cultural citizenship for many in the U. S., especially immigrants, while traditionally, access to the public sphere was limited to property owners (not to mention only open to white males). Ultimately, she argues, "divisions between 'real' national identity and consumer national identity are illusory at best" (p. 96).

In one of her most compelling chapters, Banet-Weiser provides an analysis of Nickelodeon's ambiguous relationship to girl power culture. She superbly situates these shows within the context of debates on feminism, as well as within the particular climate of gender representation in the media. Nickelodeon has been critically acclaimed for its progressive representation of strong, independent girl characters, not to mention the attention it has called to issues that affect girls in their everyday lives. In one example, the "tween" show *Clarissa Explains It All* offers a narrated view of the world through the eyes of a bright, outspoken teenager. Clarissa breaks with traditional femininity, asserts herself through a clever monologue, which is spoken directly into the camera, and intelligently critiques traditional concepts of femininity, popularity, and other mythologies that affect girls' lives. Banet-Weiser contends, "like postfeminism itself, the agency of the character Clarissa is reflective of a contradictory version of citizenship; the empowerment that it articulates for young girls does not include a model for how to access that citizenship except through representation" (p. 129). Clearly, an ambivalent feminism results from these tensions between agency and conformity.

Banet-Weiser theorizes the representations of girl power on Nickelodeon and posits that such representations indicate a contradictory feminist position which work to constitute audiences as particular kinds of cultural citizens. Banet-Weiser contends that Nickelodeon has successfully built its entire image around the term "empowerment" as it also addresses socio-political power represented in terms of feminine subjectivity. She discusses the problematic equation of visibility to empowerment, wherein previously marginalized groups come to be validated through representation precisely because they are recognized as a particular market. Thus, while Nickelodeon produces girl power culture, it simultaneously exploits it. Banet-Weiser is not arguing for a mythical "pure" political project, rather she insists that given this moment in the late-capitalist era, one cannot dismiss girl power simply because it is media-centric, and one cannot expunge commerce from politics.

Many of these same tensions are echoed in the following historically and theoretically informed chapter on race, again Banet-Weiser contextualizes Nickelodeon within the larger history of television. She discusses televised representations of race from *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Cosby Show*, up through *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. On Nickelodeon, Banet-Weiser explains, race is translated into an "urban" style — an individual characteristic and a commercial product. She claims that, within this strategy, race is diffused into a vague aesthetic of urban diversity as a brand identity for the network. Banet-Weiser terms this phenomenon "postracial." By this she does not mean that race is no longer an issue, but that in this moment multiculturalism is presented as a cultural given and as a commodity, thus deflecting attention from ongoing racial injustices in contemporary society. Race, like gender, becomes another "safe image" through which Nickelodeon aims to brand itself as a "nation" and works to constitute its viewers as consumer citizens. In two shows, *Kenan and Kel* and *Hey Arnold*, the cast of characters is clearly racialized, yet race itself is seldom mentioned directly. Banet-Weiser explains that the inherent

contradiction in the framework of consumer citizenship is that the consumer-driven commitment to diversity paints a multicultural picture of inclusion, but with no political referent or practice. She asks, "Where does this leave racist practices and minority groups?" (p. 146). She answers this question by arguing that while racist practices are not addressed, racialized individuals are left with nothing more than representation; though representations of race in this context fulfill a needed function, it ultimately distracts media audiences from political practice.

A similar conclusion is reached through Banet-Weiser's analysis of Nickelodeon's representation of queer culture; identity politics is commodified. But Nickelodeon, a children's channel, addresses its putative gay audience indirectly. As Banet-Weiser charts the history of animation at Nickelodeon, she argues that the network employs a double-coded address in its programming to widen its reach to include an audience demographic which it rhetorically ostracizes as "hopelessly square": adults. Not surprisingly, Banet-Weiser argues that "Nick" is not "just for kids." Nickelodeon attracts adults by appealing to their desire to be young and to keep up with the latest trends as well as through a signature ironic humor which sometimes speaks over the heads of its child audience. The most successful instance of this strategy is found in the hugely popular animated show *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which has been both accused and lauded for its subtle and not so subtle references to queer culture. This commodification of gay identity politics provides a kind of representation of queer culture but this representation is made possible because this segment of the population is targeted as a niche market.

Banet-Weiser's book is a welcomed addition to the field of children's media studies. Her prose is clear, and her arguments are nuanced and provocative. This engaging, highly-informed, and detailed study of Nickelodeon provides a compelling argument for why children's media deserves an analytical approach which moves beyond the often-repeated claims that children are innocent victims of television or that they are empowered users of media. But *Kids Rule!* is clearly not only about kids' media; it is indicative of a larger cultural phenomenon of consumer citizenship. Banet-Weiser's argument to seriously reconsider the traditional concepts of citizenship as a kind of politics outside of and apart from consumption practices is certainly in order. This engaging account is an important read, not only for those interested in media and children's media, but also for those theorizing the nation, postmodern politics, adult animation, or issues of representation.