Girls Rule!: Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon

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Nickelodeon is a powerful commercial cable network of television, internet activities, toy manufacturing, and video production. The network has been recognized by both industry professionals and media scholars for its representation of girls as strong, intelligent lead characters. Focusing on entertainment programs Clarissa Explains It All and As Told by Ginger, as well as on Nickelodeon’s non-fiction children’s news program, Nick News, I argue that the media context of girl power, combined with the increasing recognition of adolescent girls as both powerful citizens and consumers, offers what at times looks like a radical gesture in terms of disrupting dominant gender relations. However, we can also read the mainstream embrace of girl power as a restabilization of particular categories of gender, so that this “radical” challenge moves toward the entrenchment of conventional gender relations.

In June 2000, the Museums of Television and Radio in both New York and Los Angeles presented a three-month retrospective that honored the children’s cable network Nickelodeon. The retrospective, “A Kid’s Got To Do What A Kid’s Got To Do: Celebrating 20 Years of Nickelodeon” featured screenings of past and current programming, hands-on workshops, an interactive gallery exhibit, and seminars for families. One of the seminars, titled “Girl Power! Creating Positive Role Models for Girls,” lauded Nickelodeon’s efforts over the past 20 years to challenge traditional gender stereotypes on children’s television by featuring girls as primary lead characters. A “girl power” seminar had a particular cultural resonance in 2000: the connection between these two concepts—“girl” and “power”—once thought to be completely absent from the world of children’s popular culture, had become normalized within the discourses of consumer culture. In the contemporary cultural climate, in other words, the empowerment of girls is now something that is more or
less taken for granted by both children and parents, and has certainly been incorporated into commodity culture.

Indeed, the rhetoric of girl power has found currency in almost every realm of contemporary children’s popular culture. In the mid-1990s, The Spice Girls, a manufactured, pop-music girl-group, adopted “Girl Power!” as their motto. And, at the same time, the alternative internet community the Riot Grrrls incorporated girl power ideology in their efforts to construct a new kind of feminist politics (see, for example, Baumgardner & Richards, 1999; Currie, 1999; Douglas, 1999; Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 1998; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). T-shirts emblazoned with “Girls Kick Ass!” and “Girls Rule!” became hot new items for both high-school and elementary school girls, and Nike’s “Play Like a Girl” advertising campaign skillfully used the concept of “commodity feminism” to sell athletic gear (Goldman, 1992; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). In the sporting world, the success of the 1999 Women’s Soccer World Cup tournament, the public focus on tennis superstars Venus and Serena Williams, and the creation of the Women’s National Basketball Association brought new attention and prestige to powerful female athletes. In the world of popular psychology and everyday culture, books such as Mary Pipher’s (1995) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* and Rosalind Wiseman’s (2002) *Queen Bees and Wanna-Bes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*, recognized problems unique to young girls growing up in the 1990s and immediately became bestsellers.

In the world of children’s television, programs about self-confident, assertive, and intelligent girls such as Nickelodeon’s 1991 hit, *Clarissa Explains it All*, and more recent animated programs such as *As Told By Ginger, Rocket Power*, and *The Wild Thornberries* initiated a new trend in programming that actively rejected the conventional industry wisdom that children’s shows with girl leads could not be successful (see, for example, Seiter, 1995). Aside from these types of entertainment programs, Nickelodeon also addresses gender issues on its non-fiction news program, *Nick News*, with episodes devoted to body image, bullying, and girls’ sports, among others. This essay focuses on the cultural context that produces girl power practices and commodities, and specifically situates the cable television network Nickelodeon as a key producer of girl power culture. Is contemporary media—and Nickelodeon in particular—simply capitalizing on a current trend, or does girl power ideology signify a new direction for feminist politics? I argue here that girl power is not just a fad, although it is that; it is not just about empowerment, although it is that as well. Girl power powerfully demonstrates the contradictions or tensions that structure Third Wave feminist politics, especially for young girls. It is not my aim to “resolve” these tensions or to expose Third Wave feminism or girl power as a commercial hoax. It is my goal, rather, to theorize how the often contradictory media representations of girl power function as a kind of feminist politics. Because of the importance of media representation to all kinds of politics, it is also important to situate media powerhouses within this kind of context. Nickelodeon, for example, does not simply exploit the commercial market of girl power; the network is also a significant producer of girl power culture—especially since Nickelodeon is one of the
most influential producers of children’s programming and media in the U.S., and it attracts a large audience of pre-adolescent and adolescent girls.

It is this tension between Nickelodeon’s embrace of the girl power consumer market and its role as a producer of girl power ideology that I will explore here. But what does it mean to say that a huge corporate entity such as Nickelodeon enables girls to be producers of their own culture? Certainly, it can be argued, as Mary Celeste Kearney does, that alternative cultural productions along the margins of mainstream popular culture—‘zines, for example, or Riot Grrrl websites—illustrate how girls can produce girl power culture (Kearney, 1998). But Nickelodeon programs are hardly “alternative,” and are squarely a part of mainstream, commercial culture. To get at how Nickelodeon demonstrates the tensions within girl power culture, I analyze three of the network’s programs: Clarissa Explains it All, which first aired in 1991; As Told By Ginger (ATBG), a contemporary popular animated series, and Nick News, the weekly news program for children that is hosted and produced by Linda Ellerbee.

I chose to examine Clarissa because the program is widely noted as a “breakthrough” show in girl power programming—it was among the first children’s series to feature a strong, independent girl lead character, and through this program Nickelodeon became well-known in the industry as a champion for girls. I then look at ATBG as a way to account for the trajectory of girl power ideology in the decade since Clarissa first aired, taking specific note at the program’s use of irony and self-reflexivity as a more current rhetorical strategy of girl power. Finally, I examine Nick News for its representation of girl power themes, as well as its role as a producer of girl power culture through both the themes of the episodes and the figure of the host, Ellerbee, herself. Although Nick News differs from the other programs in that it is non-fiction, the themes on the news program—body image, popularity, parental authority—are similar to the themes in the entertainment programs, and thus it makes sense to look at all three as rich examples of mass-mediated girl power. The content of these particular Nickelodeon programs illustrates some of the contradictions within the relationship between media visibility, commercialism, and the production of girl culture—the same kinds of contradictions that also structure Third Wave feminism.

Girl Power and Generational Differences: Feminism for Whom?

Girl power programming on Nickelodeon is part of a general trajectory in the contemporary mass media that can, in part, be attributed to Third Wave feminism.1 Third Wave feminism (or sometimes “Girlie feminism”) embraces commercial media visibility and enthusiastically celebrates the power that comes with it. In this way, Third Wave feminism situates issues of gender within commercial and popular culture, and insistently positions Third Wave feminist politics as not only fundamentally different from Second Wave feminist politics,2 but because of the embrace of media visibility and the commercial world, as also more representative for a new generation of women. Indeed, one of the most impassioned discourses involving feminism lately has not been generated by differing particular political platforms, or
a specific egregious act of discrimination against women, but from the arguments, contradictions, and general disavowals between Second and Third Wave feminism. The lack of generational cohesion here between the two movements makes it difficult to figure out one’s position within feminism; as Susan Douglas (1994) has argued, the different stances on the consumer world between generations leads to a broader ambivalence about feminism: “Once this sense of generational collectivity as a market evaporates, so does the sense of political collectivity” (p. 292, my emphasis). That is, differences between Third Wave and Second Wave feminists are often represented as a generational rather than political problem. And yet, as Lisa Hogeland (2001) points out, generation is not a significant explanation for differences. The alternative, recognizing problems within feminism, means confronting the “unevenness” of the movement itself and “fundamental differences in our visions of feminism’s tasks and accomplishments” (p. 107). One of these differences concerns media visibility. Whereas many Third Wave feminists seem to regard consumer culture as a place of empowerment and as a means of differentiating themselves from Second Wave feminists, Second Wave feminism has tended, on the whole, to be critical of the misogyny of popular consumer culture.

The embrace of consumer culture is the site for tension within girl power programming on Nickelodeon as well. Once feminism (as represented through girl power), becomes part of the mainstream it has traditionally challenged, can we still talk about it as political? Can feminism be represented and enacted within popular culture, or is popular culture by design hostile to feminism? Are we simply living in, as Naomi Klein (2000) claims in her book *No Logo*, a “Representation Nation,” where visibility in the media takes precedence over “real” politics? Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), authors of the Third Wave feminist tract *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, argue to the contrary, and claim that this kind of media visibility is absolutely crucial to politics. On Nickelodeon, not only are there strong female characters on the programs, there is a general tone of empowerment and activism that shapes the network’s self-image.

In fact, we have arrived at a point where much of (liberal) feminism is part of mainstream media culture; that this is not a problem could be taken as a measure of what Second Wave feminism has accomplished (Dow, 1996). Baumgardner and Richards (2000) argue that young women who make up the Third Wave are “born with feminism simply in the water,” a kind of “political fluoride” that protects against the “decay” of earlier sexism and gender discrimination (p. 83). The struggle for positive representations in the media is certainly not over, but we also do not experience the same media that we did ten years ago, when, as Douglas (1999) contends, the most pervasive media story remained “structured around boys taking action, girls waiting for the boys, and girls rescued by the boys” (p. 293). There has been a clear historical trajectory of incorporating feminist ideologies into mainstream popular culture, ranging, as Bonnie Dow (1996) points out, from the 1970s television show *One Day at a Time* to shows in the 1980s and 1990s such as *Murphy Brown* and *Designing Women*. And yet, as Dow argues, while the liberal feminist politics of equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work have been somewhat
normalized (although the material reality of these politics is not always or even often achieved), it is also the case that the process of mainstreaming an oppositional politics often functions as a hegemonic strategy to dilute those very politics. In other words, the normalization of feminism has prevented it from existing as a discrete politics; it rather emerges as a kind of slogan or a generalized “brand.”

As a contemporary social and political movement, then, feminism itself has been rescripted (but not disavowed) so as to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture—what Robert Goldman (1992) calls “commodity feminism.” Current feminist politics involve a complex dynamic that is not only directly concerned with general gender issues, but also with issues of cultural territory: as part of a general self-identification, Second Wave feminism is at times overly romanticized in terms of its commitment to social protest politics, and there seems to be a kind of reluctance on the part of Second Wave feminists to rethink and redefine politics according to the stated needs and desires of Third Wave feminism (Susan Brownmiller, in a now infamous Time magazine interview about Third Wave feminists claimed, “they’re just not movement people”; Bellafante, 1998, p. 60). This territorialism that surrounds some of the current politics of feminism seems to be about salvaging the name of feminism (and, presumably, the politics that ground and historicize the name). Baumgardner and Richards (2000), Barbara Findlen (1995), and Naomi Wolf (1994), for example, participate in this kind of salvation project, the project of not necessarily appropriating a historical concept of feminism, but widening its borders to include more contemporary manifestations of the politics. While in theory this makes sense, and certainly these authors at times do justice to the legacies of feminisms, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) also insist that “underneath all of these names and agendas is the same old feminism” (p. 80). However, it is precisely not the same old feminism that structures the politics of Third Wave feminism. The insistence that it is stems from a range of sentiments, from nostalgic yearnings for real social protest movements to respectful acknowledgements of political practices that open up economic and social opportunities to a sheer base desire to belong to something. Without discounting these sentiments, it is also the case that lingering in this generational territory battle between Second Wave and Third Wave feminism has paralyzed the debate, and prevented the further development and refinement of a feminist praxis and material feminist politics. As Hogeland (2001) points out, “Generational thinking is always unspeakably generalizing: one reason we react so vehemently to accounts of ‘our’ generation is that changes in feminist ideas, and the social, political, and institutional impact of feminism itself have been so uneven” (p. 110).

In fact, the idea that we all share a feminist politics, that we all want the same thing, is highly problematic. Not only does this make the same mistake as many Second Wave feminists who insisted on a universal feminist standpoint, but it also functions as a kind of refusal to identify what the “thing” is that we all apparently want (see particularly Hartsock, 1998). The politics of feminism are quite obviously different for different generations, and Third Wave feminists are produced in a very different cultural and political context to Second Wave feminists.
This, then, is what situates the specific politics of girl power as a politics of contradiction and tension: the dynamics between the ideological claims of this cultural phenomenon—girls are powerful, strong, independent—and the commercial merchandising of these claims demonstrate a profound ambivalence about these feminist politics in general.

Nickelodeon produces its own kind of commodity feminism through its original programming. The television shows on Nickelodeon engage the audience member as an important consumer group, but the other components of girl power—media visibility and cultural production—are also part of the programming. The girl power programming on Nickelodeon, as well as the network’s outspoken commitment to girls as lead characters, forces us to interrogate the connections and contradictions between children’s television and empowerment. In fact, “empowerment” became the buzzword of the 1990s—not in marginalized political communities, but squarely within mainstream commercial culture. While this kind of empowerment obviously references economic power and the recognition of adolescent (and pre-adolescent) girls as an important market segment, it also seems to address a politico-social power represented in terms of feminist subjectivity. Indeed, Nickelodeon has built its entire self image around this concept of empowerment. Addressing children as empowered beings, as kids with rights, is a very different message from earlier television programming, which tended to address children as either unsophisticated or in need of protection (Hendershot, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Kinder, 1999; Seiter, 1995; Spigel, 1992). And, within the context of girl power, the relationship between empowerment and children’s television is especially charged because of television’s history as a medium that favors boy characters and boy-based programs. Thus, while part of an emphasis on the empowerment of youth signals a larger cultural shift in definitions of childhood itself, it is also reflective of shifting feminist politics, where access to female empowerment is increasingly found within commercial culture, rather than outside the hegemonic mainstream.

Obviously, to invoke the term “power” in direct connection with girls is an ideologically complex move, and has several different facets. The most economically significant way in which power connects to girls is the increasing recognition of young girls and adolescents as an important consumer group—a group that has more and more money to spend each year on girl power products (McNeal, 1992; Quart, 2003). Another important way in which power is connected with girls in the media context of Nickelodeon is through the particular gender representations on the network’s original programming. As Ellen Seiter (1995) points out, it was not really until the 1980s that children’s television began creating shows that featured girls as lead characters. Although the heroines of such 1980s programs as My Little Pony and Strawberry Shortcake were not necessarily powerful, intelligent characters, they were at least female, which challenged the earlier invisibility of girls on children’s television. Historically, a “cross-over” audience has seemed to work only in favor of boys (in other words, according to conventional wisdom, boys and girls would watch boys on television, but boys would not watch girls on television). In the past decade, however, the representation of girls on television has been influenced by
the more general mainstreaming of feminist rhetoric, and Nickelodeon has led the way in terms of children’s television.

In 1991, Nickelodeon launched its hit “tween” program, *Clarissa Explains it All*, featuring a young girl as its lead character. The network’s commitment to strong girl characters (a commitment that has demonstrated itself in more and more programming that features girls as lead characters) is an important part of its public persona: the aforementioned Museum of Television and Radio’s retrospective on Nickelodeon featured the network’s commitment to girls as a main focus. Curator David Bushman commented:

> I think Nickelodeon has empowered kids in a lot of ways … but I think they’ve specifically empowered young girls, and that’s a really important thing that Nickelodeon deserves a lot of credit for. This whole idea that you could not make girl-centric shows because boys wouldn’t watch them, they disproved that theory. (Heffley, 1999, p. 45)

Indeed, some industry professionals mark the debut of *Clarissa Explains it All* as a crucial turning point for Nickelodeon, the moment in which the network established itself as an organization dedicated to taking risks to more accurately represent and appeal to a child audience. In this sense, Nickelodeon is an important producer of girl power politics, as it explicitly connects commercial representation and the sheer visibility of girls on television with a larger recognition of girls as important empowered subjects in the social world.

Of course, the claim that representation and greater visibility of girls in the media results in a particular kind of empowerment assumes several things. First, to assume that media visibility leads to empowerment is to consider adolescent television audiences as active agents who position themselves in a variety of relationships with the ideological structures and messages of the media. While this may be true, it is also certainly true that these very same ideological structures and messages of the media privilege a commercial context that connects social power with consumption activity. Second, the acknowledgement that adolescent girls comprise an active, empowered audience does not necessarily free them from the commercial power of the mass media. To the contrary, as we witness with the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian representations on television, this kind of recognition insists on the ever-more important connection with the commercial power of the mass media (see, for example, Canclini, 2001; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Miller, 1998). The cultural dynamics that produced girl power within the constant flux of media representations of gender in the 1990s not only produced a hip new slogan, but were also part of a more general shift toward mainstreaming feminism into popular and dominant culture (Dow, 1996). Undoubtedly, this kind of media visibility carries with it a kind of power, in a cultural context where visibility is so often conflated with power and influence.

Another aspect of empowerment behind the girl power movement is a more institutional one and involves the accounting of girls as producers of their own culture (rather than simply consumers). It also entails the transformation of the
media industry itself, where more and more executives and producers are female. While, as Joy Van Fuqua (2003) argues, the relationship between women in positions of power at networks and the proliferation of strong female characters is certainly not guaranteed, it is also worth noting that, for example, the former president of Nickelodeon, Geraldine Laybourne, led the way in the children’s television market in terms of creating programming with powerful girl lead characters. *Nick News* is not only hosted but also produced by Linda Ellerbee, a known feminist and children’s activist. This institutional side of girl power production coexists with a proliferation of less mainstream forms of girl power culture, such as ‘zines including *Bust* and *Hues* and “do it yourself” (DIY) forms of cultural production (Kearney, 1998).

These elements of empowerment—as a consumer group, as media visibility, and as cultural producers—are all part of girl power. The dynamics between these variations within the theme of empowerment are complicated, and represent significant tensions and even ambivalence within feminisms. Media visibility is an important component of empowerment, but it is far from unproblematic, as scholars such as Stuart Hall (1997), Herman Gray (1997), Larry Gross (2001), and Bonnie Dow (2001) have pointed out. As Gross (2001), writing about the increasing media visibility of gays and lesbians, succinctly put it: “as we’re learning, visibility, like truth, is rarely pure and never simple” (p. 253). The power behind girl power is also complex, and is often contradictory. One of the key tensions regarding girl power exists not between the mainstream media and feminism, but rather within feminism itself, and the assumed generational differences between Second and Third Wave feminists.

**Nickelodeon and Girl Power Programming**

Catherine Driscoll (2002), in her recent study of adolescent girl culture, points out that

> the opposition between pleasure in consumption figured as conformity and pleasure against the grain of such conformity does not provide a useful model for considering girl culture, where resistance is often just another form of conformity and conformity may be compatible with other resistances. (p. 12)

In other words, concepts such as conformity and resistance are assumed to be oppositional, but in fact are mutually constitutive categories. The ideological themes of girl power that are represented in Nickelodeon programs such as *Clarissa Explains it All* and *As Told by Ginger*, where the girls are strong, independent, and often unruly are situated in relation to normative definitions of girls as obedient and docile—even as these “resistant” themes are marketed as a particular kind of product. So, for example, during the commercial break for an episode of *As Told by Ginger*, an animated program that features a group of intelligent and often ironic middle-school girls, one could often see an ad for a girl power doll: girls playing with Barbie, or something similar, dressed up in sporty clothes carrying a skateboard (or one for the new Mattel Flavas dolls, hip-hop dolls of various ethnicities positioned...
on a cardboard wall covered in graffiti). Indeed, this kind of juxtaposition so often shown on the media, between a kind of political agency and a commitment to consumerism, is one of the reasons that it is so difficult to theorize what exactly girl power is, as well as whether or not it is a feminist discourse and practice. That is to say, the typical categories that are used to talk about agency do not really apply to this contemporary context, since girl culture is ambiguous from the ground up (see, for example, Driscoll, 2002).

Discussing the exaggerated negative reaction to the Spice Girls and the subsequent dismissal of the group by critics as inauthentic and manufactured, Driscoll (2002) asks: “Can feminism be a mass-produced, globally distributed product, and can merchandised relations to girls be authentic?” (p. 272). Driscoll understands girl culture to be primarily characterized by “unresolvable tensions” between agency and conformity. She argues, “To actually embrace the community alternative girl culture imagines requires a degree of complicity with systems with which they claim to be incompatible, and they produce legitimated models of agency within the systems they say exclude them” (p. 278). This complicity with the system is precisely where Nickelodeon steps in; the discourse of girl power created a new niche in television programming and led to the creation of girl-centered and girl-powered shows. Nickelodeon programs can be seen as potentially innovative efforts to address gender representation in children’s television. However, the presentation and rescripting of gender identity for girls on Nickelodeon is not as seamless as the network’s subtext of girl power would lead one to believe. Nickelodeon demonstrates Driscoll’s point about the unresolvable tensions between agency and conformity: the network overtly situates gender identity (or positive gender portrayal) as an important element of programming, and was the first children’s network to air a program that featured a girl character in a leading role, with their 1991 live-action show, *Clarissa Explains It All*. At the same time, the network’s definition of empowerment is part of a larger system of consumer citizenship, where the recognition of an audience as a potentially lucrative one confers power on that same audience.

*Clarissa Explains it All*

With the debut of *Clarissa*, Nickelodeon became known for risk-taking in programming, and was specifically recognized as a champion for girls in television. The success of *Clarissa* has undoubtedly been a motivation for not only Nickelodeon to continue to produce shows about girls—it has followed *Clarissa* with other successful programs: *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (1994), *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (1996), *The Wild Thornberries* (1998), *The Amanda Show* (1999), and *As Told By Ginger* (2000), among others—but also for other networks to create programming that challenges “the boys-won’t-watch-girls” myth. According to the Nickelodeon press release about the show, the main character, Clarissa Darling (played by Melissa Joan Hart) “is an imaginative and very contemporary teenager who makes no bones about detailing her likes, dislikes, and fantasies. Breaking many conventions of the sitcom and using special video effects to highlight Clarissa’s thoughts and plans, the
series examines life through her eyes” (Nickelodeon press release, 2000). The idea of portraying life through the eyes of a young girl is innovative in and of itself, especially given the historical context of 1991. Nickelodeon very purposefully marketed *Clarissa* as a break-out kind of show, and the success of the program illustrated the effective marketing: boys seemed to watch the program along with girls, and the show clearly seemed to tap into the burgeoning cultural climate of girl power. The early 1990s were already emerging as a new era for pre-adolescent and adolescent boys and girls in terms of their spending power and consumption habits, and the character of Clarissa seemed to fit perfectly in this context. Indeed, Clarissa is not the stereotypical feminine heroine who relies on a man (or a boy, in this case) to save her from the various scrapes of contemporary teenage life. Although boys are featured regularly on the show—Clarissa has a younger brother, Ferguson, who often provides the annoying foil for Clarissa’s thought processes, and her best friend, Sam, is a boy her own age with whom she has a platonic relationship—the program truly does revolve around the antics of Clarissa.

As the lead character, Clarissa is portrayed as an unusually mature teenager who narrates her life to the audience as one that is full of surprises, haphazard coincidences, and typical teen dilemmas. Her parents, Janet and Marshall Darling, are caricatured as ex-hippies, and their (media-defined) sense of social responsibility shapes each episode (for example, Clarissa’s mother, Janet, is a health nut, and her father, Marshall, is an environmentally aware architect). Each episode opens with a monologue by Clarissa, where she voices some clever remark about the theme of that day’s show. Often these opening remarks are sarcastic and self-reflexive; for example, in the episode “The Misguidance Counselor” (June 14 1992), Clarissa begins the show with a sardonic statement: “Okay, time for another normal start of another normal day in the ever-normal Darling household.” This episode goes on to spoof normal families, with the central narrative organized around an obviously ridiculous plan of the school’s guidance counselor for Clarissa to “fit in.” The program in general is very intertextual in that other television shows and films are often referenced and used as part of the plot: for example, at one point in this specific episode, the show parodies early family television shows such as *Ozzie and Harriet* by depicting a black and white television set featuring the show *Oh! Those Darlings*, complete with a head shot of Clarissa in nostalgic 1950s garb, and a credit line “Clarissa Darling as Big Sis” underneath. Another episode also demonstrates this kind of ironic self-construction, where the opening line of “A Little Romance” (August 14, 1993) has Clarissa saying: “I think that it was either William Shakespeare or Sting who said, ‘love is blind; love is madness; love is reason without reason.’ Personally, I agree. Love is nuts!”

John Hartley (1999) identifies *Clarissa* as an interesting example of a particular kind of potential civic behavior. Locating the politics of citizenship within a variety of cultural artifacts and technologies within the “mediasphere,” he argues that within media and commercial culture, we have moved through a series of different levels of citizenship, ranging from civic to cultural citizenship. The present moment is characterized by yet another form of citizenship, called DIY or “Do It Yourself”
citizenship (p. 179). DIY has its roots in British punk rock and has been recognized as a particular kind of alternative cultural production (especially in terms of girl power ideology) such as ’zines and riot grrl websites (Kearney 1998; McRobbie, 1991). Interestingly, Hartley identifies the very mainstream Clarissa Explains It All as illustrative of DIY citizenship because the character of Clarissa is smart, in control of her environment, and she disrupts conventional modes of representation by talking directly to the camera. As Hartley argues, the character of Clarissa marks an important departure from conventional representations of young girls on television because she is the “undisputed centre of her show … a mainstream, fully-formed, ‘adult’ character, articulate, interesting, full of initiative, clever and congenial” (p. 184).

Hartley continues by arguing that Clarissa is a particular kind of citizen (albeit a problematic kind of citizen), in a world of children’s media that often excludes children as citizens, both ideologically and in practice. He identifies Clarissa Explains It All as a program that specifically attends to issues of citizenship for girls and, in that way, the show disrupts cultural mythologies of gender for young girls: the victim, the unintelligent, the dependent. Clarissa is quite plainly the opposite of all of these personality characteristics, but not only that, the show itself is often organized as a kind of critique of the constructed nature of cultural mythologies—of girls, of boys, of romance, of popularity. In this way, the character of Clarissa represents the kind of contradictions present in the broader politics of girl power: she is the typical powerless adolescent girl in the sense of her position in a larger culture that privileges both adults and males, but she is nonetheless a powerful figure within commercial culture. Hartley describes DIY citizenship as bringing about a kind of “semiotic self-determination” where representation of agency becomes agency in a particular televisual society; in this way, Clarissa represents a kind of girl power feminism that makes sense in this particular historical moment, and under these particular conditions.

Through its intertextuality, its unconventional methods such as narrating directly to the camera, and its casting as lead a kind of wacky teenage girl, the show represents some of the important themes of girl power ideology. For example, in the episode “Can’t Buy Me Love” (September 8, 1992), Clarissa opens the show with these remarks: “What’s in and what’s out: two harmless little questions that make otherwise rational people break out in hives.” The recognition here of both the importance of fitting in socially, and the superficiality of that desire to fit in, mirrors the larger tensions of girl power ideology. The episode continues when Clarissa’s brother Ferguson is befriended by the local rich kid, predictably named J. Elliot Fundsworth III, and is asked to pledge to join an exclusive yacht club, the Young Americans’ Junior Yacht Club. Within this relationship, Ferguson is transformed from the solidly middle-class boy that he is to a pretentious snob, interested only in elite membership at the club. J. Elliot Fundsworth III, not surprisingly, is a fraud who befriends Ferguson only to gain access to Clarissa, on whom he has a crush. Although Ferguson is constantly at odds with Clarissa in the show, it is Clarissa who saves him from the clutches of the elitist, arrogant boy.
The episode is peppered with subtle (and some not so subtle) messages about class politics; although they are certainly not radical in that the episode focuses only on the very wealthy, there is nonetheless a pro-social message intended. More interesting, however, is the role that Clarissa herself plays as the savior of her brother, and the one who rejects the love interest of the selfish rich boy. She is the lead character in the program, and each episode centrally revolves around not only her experiences as a young adolescent girl, but also around the contradictions between political action and individual subjectivity that are inherent in current definitions of girl power culture. The last episode of the program, “The Last Episode,” which aired October 1, 1994, depicted these contradictions on several different levels. The episode revolved around Clarissa’s decision to go to college in Cincinnati to study journalism. Although her decision about college had ostensibly been made, when Clarissa wrote an article for a local newspaper about teen angst and malls (could there be a more illustrative girl power topic?), she was offered an internship at the *New York Daily Post*. She then was faced with choosing between college and career, a plot theme that carried on the show’s explicit connection of gender identity with a kind of agency or citizenship.

Clarissa can be seen as an important Third Wave feminist icon. Her empowerment as a particular kind of citizen is assumed to be more generally connected to an increase in empowerment in the media and in the larger social world (in fact, “The Last Episode” is reminiscent of another media power player when Clarissa plays Murphy, of *Murphy Brown* fame, in a spoof called “Murphy Darling”). And, like Third Wave feminism itself, the agency of the character of 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. Indeed, girl power is defined by the tensions between representing girl power citizenship through the media and accessing that citizenship in a way that has larger implications for gender ideologies and practice.

As Told By Ginger

*As Told By Ginger (ATBG)* is a Nickelodeon original animated production, currently airing twice a week. The show features a main cast of five 12–13-year-old girls, and generally revolves around the issues that surround this group in their school, Lucky Middle School. Although the program does feature three younger boys (all of whom are siblings of the main characters), the episodes are primarily concerned with issues that pertain to the girl characters. The program has enjoyed some critical acclaim: it has been nominated twice for an Emmy award (Animated Series in Less Than an Hour category), but lost to *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*. Like those other animated programs, *ATBG* also presents social commentary within each episode; the girl power issues that garner a kind of social power, such as popularity, cliques, the culture of “cool,” are presented in this program within a context of critique. *ATBG* is at times self-reflexive, using parody and irony to critique social norms and standards about gender and class. The main theme of the show revolves around
some of the very same issues that *Nick News* covers in real life; Ginger Foutley, the lead character, is accepted into both the popular, cool clique at school, as well as by her long-time friends who are also represented as intelligent nerds.

In fact, one fan describes Ginger is described in the following manner:

Ginger Foutley is a regular kid—although maybe a bit more reflective than most—who’s still trying to figure out who she is. The social structure of Lucky Junior High grosses her out, but she’s also kind of obsessed with it. If she were part of the cool clique, she swears she would do things differently. Yet her bluff is called when Courtney, a princess of cool, decides Ginger can hang. With one foot in each crowd, Ginger constantly flip-flops between her loyalty to her old friends and her desire to be cool with a capital C … Welcome to junior high! (As Told By Ginger, 2003a)

The profound tensions that define Ginger’s character are mirrored by the contradictions that surround girl power culture specifically and Third Wave feminism more generally. In particular, the tensions between wanting to “be cool with a capital C” in a commercially driven culture and the dedication to genuine female friendship are a marker of girl power. While this is certainly not a new theme in children’s programming (the subject of the cool crowd seems to be a staple of programming targeted to the tween segment of the market), the refusal to resolve the issue makes *ATBG* unique.

In other words, most other children’s programs that deal with issues of popularity seem to claim the moral high ground and come out for “genuine” friendship at the expense of the obviously more superficial popular social group. Yet *ATBG* plays with the tension more, even with characters other than Ginger. For example, Courtney Gripling, “the princess of cool,” is cast in a Professor Higgins sort of role, a popular girl who wants to re-make Ginger:

Totally self-absorbed and opportunistic, Courtney takes her position as Most Popular Girl very seriously. She prides herself on the diplomatic control and manipulation of her classmates. She’s intrigued and baffled, however, by Ginger’s backbone and real friendships. So she sets out to pluck the “unknown” from the dregs of everyday life and make her a “Popular Girl.” (As Told By Ginger, 2003a)

In this role, Courtney is at times more successful than others, but there is a general refusal to cast the characters universally as either superficial or genuine. Again, this kind of ambiguity, formulated within the dynamics of consumerism (the foundation upon which the concept of cool hangs) and a discourse of the genuine, is symptomatic of Third Wave feminism and girl power culture, a politics which at times rather defensively insists that these two discourses and practices are not mutually exclusive.

This tension is not simply a side theme of *ATBG*; rather, it forms the substance of almost every episode. The tension is often represented through a strategy of parody and self-reflexivity: there is a general subtext that mocks the distinctions between social groups and characterizes the groups as trivial, even while the show constantly focuses on social groups, thus legitimating them for the tween audience. For example, in one episode, “Family Therapy” (May 25 2002), the contradictions
between the superficial cool group and the genuine real group are brought into bold relief through the figure of Ginger’s friend Macie Lightfoot. Macie, definitely not a member of the cool group, is riddled with neuroses and is an incredibly insecure, self-conscious character. In this particular episode, the program’s theme revolves around the fact that Macie and one of the cool girls, Mipsy, both have birthdays on the same day. While Mipsy’s birthday is announced at a school assembly and the cool girls immediately begin to plan a party (complete with a sushi chef flown in from Japan), Macie waits for what she anticipates will be a surprise party given by her parents. Unfortunately, her parents, both child psychologists, forget her birthday, and need to be reminded about the date by Ginger. In an effort to compensate for their forgetfulness, they shower Macie with attention. However, they are so unconnected to their daughter that they don’t realize that she is turning 13, and treat her instead as if she was a five-year-old—they throw her a party with a petting zoo, they give her a swing-set for a present and, for her party, she dresses in a dress more appropriate for a very young child.

The social commentary of the program—the child psychologists forgetting their own child’s birthday, the hyperbolic character of Mipsy’s birthday party, the embrace of the juvenile attention by Macie—characterizes this program within the same popular cultural realm as *The Simpsons* or other programs like it that offer ironic critique as part of the entertainment. ATBG is different from *Clarissa*—for one thing, it is produced at a very different historical moment to *Clarissa Explains it All*, and the increased normalization of feminist rhetoric since 1991 (when *Clarissa* was first aired) has an obvious presence on the program. The issue of cliques, although always part of the landscape in adolescent culture, occupies a new position of salience in the early 21st century, where attention to girls has not only led to an increase in commercial products for this audience, but also increased public attention to the issues that characterize girl culture.

*Nick News*

Cliques, popularity, intelligence and empowerment are some of the girl power themes in Nickelodeon’s original entertainment programming. These themes, however, not only provide interesting entertainment content, but are also represented in the non-fiction programming on the network’s award winning children’s news program, *Nick News*. *Nick News* is a half-hour weekly news program, shown every Sunday evening. Each regular edition *Nick News* covers three or four topics, and there is also a special edition *Nick News*, which devotes an entire show to one theme or special topic. *Nick News* is clearly different from *Clarissa* or *ATBG* because it is non-fiction; as a news program, it arguably provides a kind of “public sphere” for its youth audience. As David Buckingham (2000a) has argued, “for all its shortcomings, news journalism remains the primary means of access to the public sphere of political debate and activity” (p. 186). The show is hosted by Linda Ellerbee, a public figure who is not only well known as a feminist, but also as an important children’s advocate.
According to Buckingham, the key to Nick News’s success is the willingness of the program to be more adventurous with information and to “rethink politics” for children and thus address the youth audience as a slightly different kind of citizen. Nick News at times achieves the goal of establishing the relevance of traditional politics, but it is also an example of the kind of tension present in girl power programming, a tension between a more official political rhetoric and the rhetoric of consumer politics. At times, Nick News does address children as “political actors,” as Buckingham asserts. That is to say, children’s voices, desires, and opinions are treated with respect and without condescension, and the program offers specific instruction on how to act politically—by writing to one’s congressperson, by refusing the social rules of an elitist clique, or simply by educating the child audience in what free speech means. So, for example, in one episode of Nick News (October 6, 2002), the first story involved cross-burning, after a recent case in the southern U.S. This was a significant program in that it articulated the complexities surrounding issues of free speech, and Ellerbee asked the children in the studio whether, for example, the KKK has a right to free speech, pushing the children to answer why and why not.

After this story, the show cut to a commercial break. At the return of Nick News, Ellerbee immediately began the program by discussing how one’s dreams can come true—but as a rock star. The program then went on to detail the story of “O-Town,” a manufactured boy-band that came into existence as a result of the reality television show, The Making of the Band. The odd juxtaposition of these two stories exemplifies the specific tension found in girl power programming between a more typically political form of address and a more commercial address that emphasizes consumer choice. In fact, in a special episode of Nick News, “The Fight To Fit In” (December 2, 2002), Ellerbee specifically references the contradictions I am identifying more generally in girl power ideology: “Grown ups will tell you how easy it is to be a kid. Kids know better. There is, at your age—at any age really—a natural struggle between the desire to be part of a group and the desire to be an individual.”

Nick News more expressly addresses girl power in several different ways: there are some special editions, such as “The Fight To Fit In,” or “The Body Trap” (November 25, 2002), that focus on issues thought to be relevant to girl culture such as body image, girls’ personal identity, as well as on issues of inclusion in a male-dominated world. (Indeed, many of the girl power issues covered on Nick News explicitly reference the social world as largely male dominated, surely a recognition of the mainstreaming of feminist thought into children’s consumer culture). In “The Body Trap,” Nick News devoted an entire issue to problems related to body image and contained a scathing critique of the popular culture industry’s privileging of thin girls as ideals. Featuring not only celebrity Rosie O’Donnell as an “expert,” but also graphic visual footage of a young girl suffering from anorexia, “The Body Trap” is an important counter-argument to the hundreds of images of impossibly thin models within popular culture that so powerfully become the norm for young girls. The episode featured a group of children and adolescents, both boys and girls, telling their personal stories about wanting to be thin, feeling stigmatized, and so on.
Although this kind of personalized, individual story-telling is important in terms of recognizing the problem, it also functions to distract audiences from larger social issues that are a result of “The Body Trap,” such as gender discrimination, racism in the media, and so on.

Even in the regular *Nick News* schedule, girls are often featured as important story subjects (there are, of course, many stories that appeal to a cross-over audience of both boys and girls). For example, issues such as the fledgling National Women’s Football League was covered in one episode, where the story made an explicit argument about the unequal playing field for girls and boys sports, and argued that girls “are as tough as boys” (October 20, 2002). Other episodes of *Nick News* dealt with the issue of cruelty and gossip among girl cliques. For example, in an episode of *Nick News* aired on November 3, 2002, Ellerbee begins by saying: “Sugar and Spice and everything Nice, that’s what little girls are made of … NOT!” In fact, Ellerbee continues, girls can be just as mean as boys, and even meaner. The episode then depicts several young girls recounting their stories of cruelty at school, featuring author Rosalind Wiseman (of the aforementioned *Queen Bees and WannaBes*) on the voice-over stating that the “girl who has the most social power gets to do what she wants to the girl who doesn’t.” The episode also discusses the contradictions between societal expectations of girls—primarily that they be silent and passive rather than aggressive and active—and that this expectation has led to a unique kind of cruelty that relies not on overt aggression but rather a more subtle, and arguably more insidious, type of malice such as gossip and secrets. Directly connecting girl cruelty to popular culture, *Nick News* argues that girls learn “that to move up they have to pull somebody else down” through glossy magazines, music videos and other forms of popular culture that privilege a kind of brutal competition among girls. The segment ends with a discussion of Wiseman’s “empower program,” *Owning Up*, where she encourages girls to stand up for themselves if another girl is being cruel. *As Told by Ginger* suggests in an entertainment format, some of the more pressing issues of the early 21st century, at least when it comes to children, have to do with the dominant practices of femininity, self-esteem, and popularity in the social and cultural world. These topics have provided a broader cultural context for *Nick News* to address similar sorts of issues.

Finally, another way in which *Nick News* is an example of girl power programming comes not in the form of representation, but in a more extratextual way, through the host Linda Ellerbee herself. Ellerbee is a well-known journalist who has been outspoken on the problems of sexism and ageism in the field of journalism. Her production company, Lucky Duck Productions, not only produces *Nick News*, but also programs for Lifetime Television and WE (Women’s Entertainment Network). Her work in journalism has garnered numerous awards, including several Emmys and the duPont Columbia award (*Nick News* itself has won three Peabody awards). Ellerbee is also a public speaker; she is a breast cancer survivor and speaks nationally about her experience. She is well known for her respect for both women and children, and is the author of an adolescent reading series, “Get Real,” about a young girl reporter.
Henry Jenkins (1998) positions Ellerbee as an important figure in the world of children’s media regarding the treatment of children as political and social agents, rather than impressionable beings that need protection from the media. He argues that Ellerbee

creates television programs that encourage children’s awareness of real-world problems, such as the Los Angeles riots, and enable children to find their own critical voice to speak back against the adult world. She trusts children to confront realities from which other adults might shield them, offering them the facts needed to form their own opinions and the air time to discuss issues. (p. 32)

As the producer of Nick News, Ellerbee is also a producer of children’s culture—and in this specific case, a producer of girl power culture. Although Nick News is clearly not a DIY form of cultural production, or an alternative girl power 'zine, it nonetheless manages to function as an important producer of girl power ideology (Kearney, 1998).

Nick News is shaped in part by these different dimensions of girl power. The program’s focus on girl power issues, in a children’s news program that targets a youth audience, is an important form of media activism. Nick News claims to specifically empower children through the distribution of information. As Nickelodeon describes the show, “Every week Nick News keeps you in the know about the issues that are important to you, from personality profiles to interviews to polls and special guests … It’s the news the way YOU want it, with help from kids everywhere!” (Nickelodeon website, 2003). However, not only is it difficult to determine precisely what issues are important to all kids, but Nick News has the same problem as most news programs: how to connect the issues on the program with the politics of a child’s material life. As Buckingham (2000b) argues, “young people need to be provided with opportunities to engage in political activity, rather than simply observing it from a distance—in other words, that they are entitled to be political actors in their own right” (p. 187). Nick News is a program that, like citizenship itself, is fraught with tension about the various meanings of empowerment, and what it means to be a political actor. The girl power episodes on Nick News create even more of a contradiction: on the one hand, the programs do encourage an awareness of the various issues surrounding contemporary gender politics. On the other hand, these very same gender politics are the products not necessarily of political action, but of media visibility and the commercial realm. The issue of body image, for example, is an important feminist concern, and Nick News acknowledges this, but also approaches it from within the commercial realm of the media—a site that helps to produce dominant norms of femininity in the first place.

Girl Power: Citizenship or Consumerism?

Nickelodeon’s efforts to include girls as lead characters may be understood as a lucrative market strategy to capitalize on the cultural fad of girl power, but programs such as Clarissa Explains It All, As Told by Ginger, and Nick News nonetheless provide
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a different cultural script for both girl and boy audience members, a script that challenges conventional narratives and images about what girls are and who they should be. Susan Douglas (1999), writing about the Spice Girls, argues that

when adolescent girls flock to a group, they are telling us plenty about how they experience the transition to womanhood in a society in which boys are still very much on top. Girls today are being urged, simultaneously, to be independent, assertive, and achievement oriented, yet also demure, attractive, soft-spoken, fifteen pounds under-weight, and deferential to men. (pp. 47–48)

Nickelodeon programming, including the shows discussed in this essay, incorporates these kinds of tensions as part of their narrative logic, and in so doing provides a context in which both girls and boys can question dominant narratives of gender.

Bonnie Dow (1996), when discussing prime time television shows of the 1980s and 1990s that were assumed to contain a feminist message, argues that while the gender ideology on shows such as Murphy Brown and Designing Women may not create policy change or affect material politics, they nonetheless represent a kind of feminism. In other words, that these shows are being aired in the mainstream media (a place that historically has demonized feminism) does not mean they are anti-feminist:

To use the word “feminist” to describe them is not a mistake: within the limits of commercial television, they offer a version of feminist ideology. However, that ideology is one suited to television’s needs, not to the needs of a feminist politics committed to the future of all women regardless of race, class, sexuality, or life situation. (p. 214)

Indeed, I see girl power shows on Nickelodeon as also representing a kind of feminism, one that is fundamentally about tension and contradiction. Girl power television is more closely aligned with Third Wave feminism than any kind of post-feminist ideology that disavows feminism. On the contrary, girl power programs such as Clarissa and As Told By Ginger are visibly situated within a Third Wave ethos, where empowerment and agency define girls more than helplessness and dependency. However, this empowerment is represented as an individual choice, and at times resembles other commercial choices we all make. In other words, Nickelodeon is an important producer of a kind of feminism, but commercial and media visibility is an important part of what legitimates that feminism. This does not mean that girl power television is not feminism; but it does mean that a significant component of Third Wave and girl power feminism is about media visibility. The mixing of political addresses within the programming and advertising on Nickelodeon—both feminine and feminist, both social and individual—reflects the kind of dynamic Third Wave feminists adopt as part of their subjectivity. Thus, the network itself speaks to its child audience in a mix of conflicting feminist voices.

The images young girls and adolescents watch on Nickelodeon—images of Clarissa Darling, or Ginger Foutley, or the real girls on Nick News—are empowering, at least within a specific context. They are diverse, and they represent a range of options and models, and in many ways these images are a refreshing and politically
authorizing change from traditional images of femininity. While obviously the commercial shaping of girl power cannot be denied, girl power, like other forms of feminism, is about a particular kind of recognition. This is not simply a recognition that so-called “women’s issues” such as sexual harassment, equal work for equal pay, and legal policies on rape and abuse are important issues that need to be addressed in the public sphere. It is also a recognition of women as contributing members of society now meriting a kind of visibility. And increasingly, the kind of visibility that carries with it an important dimension of power is media or cultural visibility.

In this sense, the easy dismissal of girl power as a media-created new commercial avenue that has no connection with any kind of real politics is both inaccurate and misleading about the nature of reality in the 21st century. The charge by Second Wave feminists regarding the apparent lack of real politics in Third Wave feminism may very well indicate, in part, the latter’s preoccupation with personal issues and individualism. But this sentiment not only romanticizes the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s as concerned only with the social and material spheres; it also caricatures feminist politics of the 1990s as narcissistic and vacuous. As Susan Douglas (1994) has pointed out, the representation of women and girls in the media has historically encouraged a kind of love/hate relationship, where seemingly contradictory messages about being strong and weak, beautiful and business-like, assertive yet demure, have been offered to female (and male) audiences as a model for subjectivity. The media address of Third Wave feminism and girl power ideology is no different: it is also about tension and contradiction, about the individual pleasures of consumption and the social responsibilities of solidarity. Although obviously the political landscape has changed since the 1960s, and it seems evident in many contemporary examples that individual concerns have taken precedence over larger community or social issues, it is too easy to dismiss girl power as only or simply media fluff. The collectivist drive that defined the feminist movement during the Second Wave emerged not only because the feminists of that era were particularly politically minded, but also because the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement and the anti-war movements (as well as other political upheavals during this time) provided a rich context for collective protest. For contemporary women, the focus on individualism and the increasing significance of commercial culture provides a context for a very different kind of feminism to materialize. One project for feminists, then, is to attempt to understand the discourse of Third Wave feminism on its own terms, and not always through comparison to an imagined and nostalgic golden age of feminism of the 1970s.

Notes

[1] Third Wave feminism is generally characterized as a movement centering on female self-empowerment that emerged in the 1990s. Third Wave feminism often uses both mainstream and marginalized popular and commercial cultures as mechanisms to celebrate female sexuality and access empowerment. The cultural expression of Third Wave feminism is often playful and ironic, exemplified in television such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, activist groups like Riot Grrrl and 'zines such as *Hue* and *Bitch*. Third Wave activists, most often in
their 20s and 30s, are focused on a broad range of feminist issues, ranging from abortion rights to individual self-esteem.

[2] Second Wave feminism generally refers to the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Second Wave activists were focused on fighting for gender equality in the workplace, abortion rights, economic parity, violence against women, and other issues. The Second Wave of feminism was defined by the collectivist drive that motivated the movement, and focused not only on the equality of women with men, but also on the liberation of women from patriarchy. Some of the important legislative measures that occurred as a result of the efforts of Second Wave feminists are, to name a few, the Equal Pay Act 1963, Title VII, the Civil Rights Act 1964, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

[3] Boys also influence the purchasing power of their parents. Children in general have been increasingly recognized as a very important market because of not only their own power as a group, but also the extended power that comes from their influence on their parent’s commercial decisions.

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