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Reality television has come a long way since PBS's groundbreaking 1973 series *An American Family*, which followed the Louds family of Santa Barbara, California, as they coped with sibling rivalry, parental separation and divorce, the homosexuality of the oldest son, and other family tensions. Over the next two decades the reality TV genre would slowly emerge until its popularity mushroomed in the wake of MTV's *The Real World* series which debuted in 1992. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s reality television thrived by pushing the envelope of acceptable televisual content and introducing new sub-genres like reality dating, reality home renovation and real estate marketing, reality fashion intervention, and reality competition. In 2007 the genre ushered in another unique twist with the debut of *Kid Nation*. The premise of the show was derived from William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, which tells a story of children who establish a civilization on a deserted island and in the process experience agony and travail as they confront interpersonal and organizational hierarchies. In this vein, *Kid Nation* was marketed as a show about 40 kids, aged eight to 15, left alone for 40 days to establish their own society in an abandoned town in the middle of a desert. One CBS network executive described the show as "aspirational; it's an extraordinary group of kids, 8-to-15-years-olds creating their own society" (Steinberg). Host Jonathan Karsh started the first episode with this introduction:

This is Bonanza City, New Mexico, or what's left of it anyway. The pioneers who ran this place back in the 1800s ran it into the ground. Lack of leadership and lack of will combined to leave this town completely and totally, *dead*. But that's about to change. Now forty new pioneers will try to fix their forefathers mistakes and build a town that works. It won't be easy. Pioneer living is tough. And the amazing part is, these pioneers *are children*. That's right. The oldest just turned 15. The youngest is eight and a half. They are every kind of kid imaginable: city kids, country kids, rich,

poor, and everything in between. And they're on their way here, right now.

Karsh thus set up the premise for the show with three overlapping themes that set the tone for the entire season: diversity, leadership, and work. These themes form the arc of the storyline in each episode and serve as the structure upon which the children are to build a “new” community. In terms of the first theme, the introduction and promos for the show emphasize that the participants represent the diversity of kids across America and in the first episode Karsh tells the kids that the four children chosen to be on the first Town Council are also representative of that diversity. However, despite the emphasis on diversity, many of the children are branded in stereotypical roles that they are encouraged to inhabit for the entire series. For example, in the first episode, the introduction of the children is paired with categorical descriptions and visual representations of the types of children chosen. “City kids” are depicted by a single, black boy. A white, overweight girl is used to show “country kids.” The image of a white boy represents “rich kids.” And finally, a grouping of bus seats with focus on an Asian girl and a Hispanic boy accompanies the title “poor kids.” This opening sets the tone for how socio-cultural stereotypes are treated as reality in *Kid Nation*.

The second theme is leadership. In the first episode Karsh introduces four children who will serve on the Town Council: Mike, “a capable Boy Scout”; Taylor, “a gung ho pageant queen”; Anjay, “a genius spelling bee champ”; and Laurel, “a respected student leader.” Town Council re-elections were held on day sixteen and day twenty-nine and each time the kids had to decide whether to retain the current members or elect new ones. The elections were contentious and there was much debate over who should be on the Town Council and whether the current members were doing a good job. Hence, struggles over leadership provided the requisite reality show conflicts. In addition to presiding over the town, the council members were also given the

task of awarding a gold star worth \$20,000 to a child at the end of each episode and in the final episode they gave away three gold stars, each worth \$50,000, thus making four children responsible for distributing the only substantial monetary compensation any of the participants had the chance to receive for their labor on the show.

The third and most dominant theme of the show is work. In the opening segment, Karsh emphasizes that the forty days in Bonanza City will require hard work and in that respect the show does not fall short. From the first episode to the concluding one, *Kid Nation* focuses on the vast amount of work done by the children in Bonanza City. This study deconstructs the nature of the work done by the participants and analyzes the value assigned to that work within the context of *Kid Nation* and the reality TV genre.

Setting the Stage

CBS launched *Kid Nation* on September 19, 2007 at 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time and used it as a lead-in to two of its very strong programs, *Criminal Minds* and *CSI: New York*. This lead-in status demonstrated CBS's confidence in the show's popularity and profit-making power. Two days before the debut, on September 5, 2007, Yahoo listed *Kid Nation* as the most searched show among the upcoming fall series in America and as of September 4th, 2007 according to the Nielson ratings, *Kid Nation* had the highest level of network television show awareness among bloggers (Frutkin). In previewing the series, CBS eschewed television critics, and instead held screenings at schools in at least seven large cities (Wyatt, "A CBS Reality Show"). These promotional efforts certainly paid off. However, controversy also greatly contributed to the discourse circulating about the program. In contrast to the promotions, it was apparent that adults were present for the entire 40 days and filming took place at Bonanza Creek Movie Ranch, a privately owned town setting outside of Santa Fe that has been used in dozens of

productions like *Easy Rider*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Silverado*, *Lonesome Dove*, *Gunsmoke*, and *All the Pretty Horses* (“Productions”). This comes as no surprise since it has been well documented that reality television is anything but a representation of “real life.” *Kid Nation* garnered controversy as accusations of staging situations and scripting dialogue for maximum conflict circulated after the show aired. Some parents who were present for the last day of filming claimed that the children were not just being filmed but that they were also fed lines and asked to redo scenes, practices that are not unusual for reality television. Reality television scripts, known as “paper cuts” are common, although writers are typically called story editors or segment producers instead of being listed in the credits as writers. Daniel Petrie Jr., president of the Writers Guild of America-West, points out that although reality television programs don’t use detailed scripts in the same sense as sitcoms or dramas, they do outline the key elements of storytelling: “structure, situation, [and] character” (Booth C.01). One writer who regularly works on reality television shows describes the process thusly:

We're not sitting in a room writing dialogue ... we write outlines, with beats. We write specific jokes. We contrive comedic situations and then we help edit them, and we go back and reshoot scenes to bring out the various stories. And sometimes we just tell the contestants you're mad, you're happy, whatever. Act that way. And if they're not getting it, we feed them a line (Booth C.01).

Jeff Hermanson, assistant director of the Writers Guild of America - West stated that reality TV is “the sweatshop of the entertainment industry. ... What’s happened with *Kid Nation* is typical and universal, but then it’s that much worse because it’s about children” (Fernandez, “Children’s”). Executive producer Tom Forman insists that the parents simply observed “pick-ups” for scenes missed due to technical difficulty and that the show was not scripted (Fernandez, “*Kid Nation*”). These criticisms were coupled with concerns about the children’s safety when stories of the violation of child labor laws emerged as well as reports that several children drank

bleach from an un-marked bottle (Poniewozik). In addition, in episode six, 11-year old Divad is asked by another child about marks on her face and she says that she was burned by hot grease when cooking. After the show aired her mother filed a complaint in New Mexico calling for an investigation into "abusive acts to minors and possible violations of child labor laws." However, the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office found no criminal wrongdoing on the part of the production company (Wyatt, "A CBS Reality Show"). But perhaps the most shocking story of all to hit the press was that the parents of the participants had been required to sign a 22-page contract with CBS, waving the right to hold CBS and all parties involved responsible for anything that happened during the taping, including serious injury, contracting AIDS, getting pregnant, losing a limb, or dying ("*Kid Nation* Controversy"). In describing the contract, Screen Actors Guild deputy national executive director Pamm Fair stated that "it's been a long time since we've seen such egregious provisions for any performer, let alone children" ("Unions"). Parents could not be in contact with their children during the 40 days of taping and parents and children were forbidden to talk about the show unless they had express permission from CBS, i.e., on an approved publicity interview. Because of all of the negative attention, the press speculated about whether or not advertisers would support the show. Some of CBS's top 10 advertisers, including Proctor & Gamble, General Motors, Ford, Pepsi-Cola, and Anheuser-Busch declined to advertise, though some of them took a "wait and see" approach. In the end, the premiere of the show ran for 38 minutes before showing a commercial, instead of following the standard of having a commercial break after the first 15 minutes of the show. Also, for a show of more than an hour, it contained only 6 minutes, instead of the usual 16 minutes, of commercials. This demonstrated that it was in fact "light on ads." However, by the third episode some advertisers had returned to the network and the time-slot (Wyatt, *Kid Nation*). Ultimately, although the

program did not shoot a second season, its first season was successful enough for CBS to generate a profit.

The Contested Labor of Children

The term “child labor” typically conjures up images of young children in underdeveloped countries working for long hours and little pay in manufacturing sweatshops. In contrast, children in the United States are subject to child labor laws that make it illegal for children to work long hours under most circumstances. Furthermore, the tide of public opinion is against children working in lieu of attending school as evidenced by the discourse of public service campaigns, politicians, school boards, and truancy experts that urge children to “stay in school.” However, there is one industry that typically gets a pass when it comes to employing child workers: the entertainment industry. Although children in the entertainment industry work to produce a saleable good, it is not generally thought of as “child labor” because the resulting product masks the nature of the labor performed. That is to say, the mechanics of the labor—performer and crew remuneration, work conditions, benefits or lack thereof—are not immediately apparent to or easily ascertained by the viewer. In addition, the children involved in this type of work are generally thought to be willing participants as opposed to sweatshop laborers with few other options. This is the “paradox of creative labor in contemporary cultural economies”: its nuances are invisible to the audience (Conor). However, they are not invisible to those hoping to make a profit from that labor. Tom Forman, creator and executive producer of *Kid Nation* (and co-creator of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*) stated that New Mexico was chosen as the site for *Kid Nation* because that state had no specific regulations concerning the use of child actors in television and film production (Wyatt, “A CBS Reality Show). Other states like California and New York have very specific regulations regarding the number of hours

children can work on productions, would not have allowed the children to be separated from their guardians, and would have required tutors to be on set (since the program was shot in April and May). After the production finished shooting, New Mexico passed legislation closing a loophole that had exempted television and theatrical productions from child labor laws restrictions. “We didn’t have anything in our statutes that said they can’t work a child 10 hours a day, so we had hoped that [productions] would operate in the best interests and do what’s best for the children,” said Tiffany Starr-Salcido, who specializes in child workplace rights at the New Mexico Department of Labor (Cianci). However, executive producer Forman denies that the children even worked at all, saying that they “weren’t really employees of anyone because they received \$5,000 stipends for going to a summer camp.” He goes on to say that “we went ahead and made this show as we make every reality show, with the understanding that the kids were going to do whatever they do. ... We’re not going to consider them actors. We’re not going to give them set schedules. And on that basis, we didn’t see a labor problem” (McCollum, 2007). Jonathan Anshell, general counsel for CBS agreed, saying that “The cameras are following people through an experience but those people are not working in the same way that one normally thinks of working a job” (Fernandez “Children’s”). In filings with the state of New Mexico, the production was literally listed as a summer camp and when state inspectors wanted to review the children’s work permits on site they were denied access to the set and told that work permits weren’t needed since the children were “participating” not “working” (Fernandez, “Nation”). However, according to labor laws in the states with the most television and film productions (California and New York), part of the definition of work *is* “to be filmed by a camera” and for-profit productions must *employ* their workers both on- and off-screen. Having anticipated that roadblock, casting directors for the program were told to avoid submitting

children from California and New York in order to reduce the possibility of labor law violation claims (Hibberd, “Panel I”). And indeed, no children from the two most populous states in the nation appear on the program. These issues point to why both the writers’ and performers’ unions have long been concerned about reality television productions’ use of non-union resources that work long hours without overtime or benefits. With all the controversies, Forman stated that were he to produce a second season of *Kid Nation* it might very well be shot overseas (Hibberd, “Panel II”). Normally, due to contracts with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA), network productions in the United States must employ a certain percentage of union performers. However, the networks often circumvent this requirement for reality television productions by shooting overseas in what are dubbed “runaway” productions in highly favorable markets like Toronto, in order to take advantage of inexpensive, non-union labor and low production costs. Another strategy employed by the networks to avoid SAG and AFTRA requirements is to create subsidiary companies to deal with the non-union productions and thereby “distance themselves from any liability for labor practices or lawsuits of any kind” (Fernandez, “Nation”). CBS owns the copyright to *Kid Nation* through Magic Molehill Inc., a subsidiary company which has also held copyrights to other reality fare on CBS and the CW.

Contestations aside, it is our argument that the children in *Kid Nation* perform two types of labor: cultural and manual. Although they overlap, we will examine them separately in order to fully understand the nature and meaning of the work performed on *Kid Nation*. The cultural labor is that which creates a product for CBS that is primarily promoted as being about children working independently of adults to form a new society. For this labor the children are paid a stipend of \$5,000 for: 40 days and nights of work getting the basic footage, the use of their

images in perpetuity, and their silence about the entire experience. The children sometimes worked 14-hour days, being filmed from the time they woke up until they went to bed. Their images were used in television commercials and still and moving images of them are still on the *Kid Nation* website. And when they agreed to participate, they signed a confidentiality agreement that “prevents them from speaking to the press without the ‘consent of an authorized representative of CBS’” with a penalty of \$5 million dollars for breaking the agreement (Fernandez, “*Kid Nation*”).

This work is being done in conjunction with a team of people that includes the host of the program, producers, writers, camera operators, lighting operators, editors, graphic artists, website designers, and publicists, all of whom work to make the finished product look polished and professional enough for network television, yet spontaneous and unscripted enough for the reality television genre in order to generate an audience that will attract advertisers. Society continues to be fascinated with what “real people” will do in unreal situations such as being stranded on a desert island, choosing a spouse from a list of suitors, staying inside a house in which they are watched 24 hours a day, and undergoing vomit-inducing challenges. *Kid Nation* borrows from various tried-and-true reality formats in order to produce a predictable product for network consumption. The theme of isolation and survival has been used with great success in the *Expedition Robinson* formats (like *Survivor*), while the historical reenactment theme dates back to the 1999 United Kingdom production of *The 1900 House* and spin-offs like the 2002 United States production of *Frontier House*. And team competition has become a staple of numerous reality television formats from adventure shows like *The Amazing Race* to vocational shows like *The Apprentice*. The *Kid Nation* participants provide the raw materials for creating a cultural product that draws on some of the major conventions of reality television.

The second type of labor executed by the *Kid Nation* participants is the manual labor necessary to produce a cultural product about children working. The most important labor for running the town are the blue-collar jobs that keep the town running: cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, cleaning the outhouses, haul trash, pumping and carrying water, feeding the chickens, butchering the chickens, and milking the goats, among other tasks. This work is highlighted throughout the season and is the core component of the product, i.e. seeing the children working is the unique selling proposition of this network product.

The Product: A Class Act

The end result of the cultural and manual labor executed by the children is a network program that was promoted as giving participants a chance to plan their own society when instead, normative ideas about a capitalist society with clear separations between classes were the underlying assumptions of the entire show. Some critics even worried that *Kid Nation* emphasized worst aspects of the U.S. society, such as group inequalities and fighting for limited resources (Elias). Instead of presenting the children with a clean-slate society that they were to design themselves, the producers presented the children with pre-fabricated ideas about how the town should be run and how its inhabitants should relate to each other. Each week the leaders of the town were tasked with reading a diary supposedly left by the town's previous inhabitants. The diary was a complete fabrication and the suggestions therein were, in essence, stage directions for the children. On the second day of their stay they were advised, via the diary, to divide the town's inhabitants into four districts and were provided color coded bandanas in order to enable an efficient division of labor in the town. The town council leaders enthusiastically took this advice and immediately divided the town into four teams with each of them serving as the leader of one. This "advice" was obviously integral to the structure of the program since in

each episode teams must compete in order to determine what class (upper-class, merchants, cooks, or laborers) they will belong to for the week. So although the program was advertised as giving kids the chance to rebuild Bonanza City and show the type of society that a diverse group of kids can build—an experiment with a variety of possible outcomes—in actuality, the program had a pre-determined structure within which the kids were to operate. One can't help but wonder what the trajectory of the show would have been had the children refused to be divided into four groups to compete for the privilege of being in the upper-class. That might have made for a more interesting “reality” as well as exploration of children's ideas for the organization of society. Instead, stereotypical class constructions are presented as unproblematic norms to which the cast is expected to conform, while the show itself is marketed as a look at what type of society kids will construct when left to their own devices. Thus, although *Kid Nation* was a breakthrough in reality television in its (mis)use of children, it simply trod well-worn ground in its constructions of class.

On the third day of the show Karsh introduced the system of labor as follows:

As you can see on the board, starting right now you get paid for doing your jobs. Laborers get ten cents for hauling water and cleaning latrines. The cooks get twenty-five cents. The merchants get fifty cents for running all the stores and then there's the upper class. They get a dollar, no assigned chores and they can pitch in wherever they're needed. We're going to figure out who does what *fairly*. In true Wild West fashion, we're going to have a showdown. It's district against district to earn your jobs and your paycheck.

After the districts changed into their showdown uniforms Karsh explained the rules of the showdown to them. In his words, the showdown was all about “teamwork and leadership.” Each team had to run to pipes in a field that were connected to giant water towers that pumped color-coded water. The teams had to fill up water jugs with the correct color water for their team in order to win. The first-place team would then be the upper class, the second place finishers

would be the merchant class, third place would be the cooks, and fourth would be the laborers. In addition, if every district finished within an hour, the whole town would win a prize. As soon as the competition was announced, the teams immediately went into battle mode, chanting their team names, taunting other teams, and psyching themselves up for the competition. After an hour of labor the results were that the red team became the upper class, the blue team became the merchants, the yellow team became the cooks and the red team became the laborers.

This competition structure was repeated eleven additional times throughout the series with the children competing on teams for the first, second, third, and fourth place rewards of being the upper class, merchants, cooks, or laborers as well as an overall prize based on the collective performance of the teams. The children never questioned the imposed setup of their society and the host never presented any alternatives. In fact, in introducing the structure of labor Karsh presented it as an inevitable part of organizing, saying, “you guys have been in Bonanza City for a few days now. Are you ready to get organized?” In fact, the kids were already starting to get organized by their own initiative. Sophia, one of the older kids had taken charge of the cooking duties and she and a team of kids were making meals for everyone. The kids had also chosen their bunkhouses themselves so that everyone had a place to sleep. Nevertheless, Karsh presents the division of labor that will hold throughout the show, one in which the blue collar workers (cooks and laborers) make 50% – 80% less than the middle class (merchants) and 75% - 90% less than the upper class. Thus, although Bonanza City cannot function without cooks and water haulers, the work itself is framed as a punishment for losing the team competition. And the children certainly see it that way. On her first day as a laborer, green team member Sophia, who was previously in charge of cooking said, “I’m a laborer now. This morning I got up at six to scrub toilets. I did laundry and I hauled a big barrel of water and I

just got ten cents and I can't afford a game of jacks." Sophia visited the hardware store and saw a bicycle that she really wanted but at three dollars it was far more money than she had. So she went out into the middle of Main Street, put out a jar, and started dancing for a nickel. She earned the three dollars to buy the bicycle. In the same episode, 14-year-old Michael states, "I'm in the green district and right now we're at the bottom rung sadly, the laborers, and hauling water is my job back and forth. This is like torture. It's like colder than extremely cold." Laurel, the council member leading the green team, thought that it would be "especially embarrassing to get last place two times in a row" and another green team member stated that "everybody in the green district wants to be out of the laborer class" since "being paid two buffalo nickels for the hard work that we're doing right now, is just kind of discouraging." In the promo for the second show Karsh explained that "the showdown separated the town into the haves [shot of a red team member buying chocolate] and have-nots [shot of green team members pumping water] with last place green laboring at the bottom [shot of Sophia dancing in the street] begging in the streets." At the end of week three, after the red team had been the manual laborers, 14-year-old DJ from Illinois, one of the red team members, had this to say: "So I'm in the laborer class. That's the lowest, you know, class. We have to do the hardest work, just for ten cents." DJ is then shown hauling water with a fellow team member followed by a shot of DJ in the general store attempting to buy a handful of jelly beans only to be told by the storekeeper, "Hey dude, you don't have enough money for that. I feel sorry for you guys."

The cooks' job was to prepare three meals a day for the entire town, wash the dishes, and clean the kitchen. The teams that became the cooks struggled with the amount of work necessary to keep a town of forty fed. The yellow team was especially resistant to getting up early enough to cook breakfast and the girls on the team are shown in bed while children from

the other teams do the cooking. One morning they got up late and only cooked potatoes for the kids and went around the town spooning them out into people's hands. When they did cook, some team members then balked at the idea of doing dishes. In the first episode the team leader, Taylor stated, "No, I'm not doing dishes. I'm a beauty queen. I don't do dishes." Once when some of the green team members went to look for her to wash dishes, they found her sitting in the saloon drinking "shots" with fellow yellow team member, Leila. After she lost her seat on the Town Council in episode five, Zach, who replaced her as the yellow team leader threatened to withhold her pay if she doesn't do any work. Although the yellow team is relegated to be the cooks six times during the season, Taylor is only shown washing dishes in one of the very last episodes, so that she can be allowed inside an arcade the town has won.

While the laborers and cooks did all the manual labor in the town the merchants were tasked with running all the stores in the town: a candy store, a hardware store, a grocery store and a saloon. Very little is shown on the show about details of running the stores. They are not shown stocking the stores, pricing the merchandise, or otherwise managing the stores. They simply stand behind the counters selling the merchandise. The upper class spent their time sleeping late and spending their money in the stores. When the yellow team wins the upper class spot in the third episode, they are shown in the saloon spraying each other with seltzer. Taylor explains, "It's really awesome being in the upper class and having a dollar to spend. You sleep in, do whatever you want ... With nothing to do in town, a seltzer fight is just what we need."

By the time the second showdown rolled around, the kids were extremely excited to compete again in order to keep their positions in the case of the upper class or to become the upper class in the case of everyone else. As 12-year-old Michael stated, "*I do not* want to lose

this upper class position because you get the big pay.” Others were really eager to beat the blue team because they felt them to be arrogant due to the fact that they were comprised of a lot of the older kids or to defeat the yellow team and make them the laborers because of their laziness. Ten-year-old Savannah from Kentucky stated that “they’re as lazy as a sack of potatoes.” Basically no one wanted what Karsh described as “dirty jobs for only ten cents.”

After the first gold star worth \$20,000 is awarded to Sophia at the end of the first episode, the value of labor takes on a whole new meaning for the kids. Mike, town council member and red team leader observed that “Today morale just skyrocketed. Everyone is so much happier now. We all have a lot more fun now.” Karsh tells the kids, “I hope that Sophia inspired you guys because any one of you can win the gold star and every time it’s worth *\$20,000 dollars*.” Greg, who had been the town bad-ass for the first four days said, “I’m proud of Sophia. Sophia won the gold star and twenty thousand dollars is *a lot* of money. I think people are gonna work harder, try and get those gold stars. You know I’m gonna work harder and I’m gonna get one.” In episode two, when the kids decided to kill two of their chickens for dinner, Greg chopped off their heads, helped to skin them, gut them, and carve them for cooking. Afterwards he stated that “I think you know, maybe killing the chickens might help you know with my nomination for a gold star and who doesn’t want to get the gold star. Twenty grand is amazing.” When at the end of the second town meeting he is not awarded the gold star he is visibly upset and later says, “I was the obvious choice. I did the chickens and I did a hell of a lot more work than Michael did which I thought was pretty disrespectful and I’m gonna do something about it.” In the next few episodes, Greg is shown working extremely hard in a variety of manual jobs, even when he is in the upper class or a merchant. In the fifth episode Greg finally does get the gold star. When Taylor announces the winner, Greg is visibly moved and says to the kids, “Um, you guys have

no clue what this means to me.” With his voice breaking he holds up the star and says, “This right here means I’m going to college. I had no money put away for college right now. This ... you guys have no clue how much this is gonna do for my life. Thank you guys. Thank you.” When he calls his mother to tell her the good news one of the first things he says is, “This is for my college fund.” To which she says, “Amen.”

Greg is the first of many kids shown deliberately competing for the gold star, some successfully, some not. Most of the children who do win the gold star are framed as not only deserving it but like Greg, also *needing* the money for various reasons. DJ, a 14-year-old from Illinois says, “I grew up with six brothers and sisters and my mom taught us how to be strong, how to love each other without all the drama, without all the negativity.” In the third week at Bonanza City, he is shown getting increasingly tired of the arguing and fighting among the children and in the town hall meeting he raises his hand and states that he wants to go home. However, town council member Guylin convinces him to stay after which they announce that he has won the gold star. Upon winning he states that he will use the money to allow his six brothers and sisters to go to college and get an education. Twelve-year old Pharaoh from Georgia was not as fortunate. He lobbied for the gold star because he said that his mother worked very hard, the bills were piling up, and they truly needed the money. He had many people nominate him but in the end he lost out to 11-year-old Nathan, a quirky but hard-working home- schooled child from Illinois. Another unsuccessful lobbyist was 11-year-old Divad from Georgia. While she was in the upper class with no chore duties she decided to open a snack shop and sold food from the kitchen that children could otherwise get for free. She also made posters asking people to nominate her for the gold star and passed out food to people in line to talk to the Town Council about who should get the gold star. When she was asked by the Council who

should get the gold star she voted for herself. The Council however, felt that she was “only working for the gold star” and did not award it to her.

Conclusion

The designation of blue-collar work as undesirable is a strong message throughout *Kid Nation*. The competition structure of the program sets up the division of labor as the result of a mythical meritocracy in which the winning team is made to feel that they deserve to get paid the most and the worst team is made to feel as if they deserve to get paid the least. One critic observes that the show was "not so much an exercise in socialization as the indoctrination of children into a consumer culture." Since money was "parceled out to them according to their predetermined stations in life" (Shales). And although the show was billed as kids trying to show that they could create a functioning society, the main goal of many of the participants seemed to be to win the team competition so that they could make more money and do less work or to work hard in order to win to gold star. The children that break out of the mold set for them by the structure of the show are either strongly vilified or generously rewarded. Taylor, the most egregious violator of the structure, is vilified for being lazy. She refuses to do dishes, clean the kitchen, haul trash, or anything that goes against her ingrained “pageant queen” status. Fifteen-year-old Greg and 14-year-old Sophia, as two of the oldest participants on the show, do a lot of work outside of their assigned class as they help the younger kids when needed. Greg’s blue-collar background in particular comes in handy in several situations. He states that he has worked as a pipefitter, a butcher, and a roofer and uses those skills to help his team and the town.

Overall, blue collar work on *Kid Nation* is presented as a necessary evil that no one truly wants to be a part of. First of all, the tasks themselves are portrayed as hard and unpleasant. Second, they pay very little in terms of *Kid Nation* currency. Third, these tasks are the

punishment for coming in last or next to last in the team showdown and no team wants to be branded as losers. Finally, in terms of real currency, the children are being paid a basic \$5,000 stipend regardless of the manual labor done on the program and a maximum of only thirteen kids could receive an extra \$20,000 and three kids an extra \$50,000. The majority of the participants only received \$5,000 which for being on set 24 hours a day, seven days a week for 40 days amounts to a base pay of \$5.21 an hour. For the younger children the gold stars seemed out of reach since many of them did not have the physical strength to make the same impact in the blue collar jobs and they were less likely to take leadership roles than the older kids. Although there were twenty-three participants between the ages of eight and eleven, only four of them received gold stars; twelve of the seventeen kids between twelve and fifteen were awarded gold stars and two of them (14-year-old Sophia and 12-year-old Morgan) received two.

Long after the program has aired and the money has been spent, the product that these children helped to create will still be in circulation. All of their working and not working, laughing and crying, cheering and complaining, planning and plotting was edited, broadcast, critiqued, and viewed by millions of people in the tabloid-like format common to reality television. Three years after its debut, the website is still active and episodes are still available online as well as for sale on sites like ioffer.com. We are left to wonder what fallout the children may have experienced and may still be experiencing from family, friends, classmates, teachers, neighbors, and even strangers that saw the program. Child advocacy organizations like A Minor Consideration have expressed concern over the long-term effects of children laboring in the entertainment industry and the vagaries of reality television heightens those concerns. Perhaps the willingness of parents to allow their children to engage in this form of labor is a response to the seductiveness of mass media as a validation of their child's specialness. Unfortunately the

program is a lost opportunity to actually explore what children from a diversity of backgrounds might come up with if given the chance to think, work together, and imagine a new world. But network television would rather stick to the same old class act.

Since *Kid Nation* aired, several scholars have examined the show and the surrounding media coverage. Arganbright, Gehrke, and Chunbo (2008) concluded that news writers contributed to the controversy about the show by framing their coverage in terms of a skewed view of childhood normalcy. They argue that journalists, when critiquing the show, did not take into consideration the diverse types of childhoods and labor arrangements experienced by children in America and around the world. We certainly agree that economic, geographical, and socio-cultural factors play a large role in determining acceptable childhood experiences. However, in the case of *Kid Nation* perhaps the most pertinent standards for evaluating the treatment of the participants in *Kid Nation* are the standards set by the industry in which the show operated. Compared to child entertainers on other network programs, the labor arrangements of the *Kid Nation* participants—contract terms, work hours, and compensation—were woefully inadequate. But as children are increasingly a part of the reality television landscape, perhaps a new standard is being created. In the four years since *Kid Nation* aired, there has been a proliferation of reality programs that feature children as the central theme. In particular, programs like *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, *Kate Plus 8*, *Table for Twelve*, and *17 Kids and Counting* documenting the lives of children in very large families have become increasingly popular. The highly rated *Kate Plus 8* drew an investigation by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor in regards to its compliance with child labor laws. In addition, an aunt and uncle of the children have stated that the children do not like being on camera (“*Jon and Kate*”). Another extremely popular program featuring children is TLC’s *Toddlers and Tiaras*. This program

follows children and their parents on the beauty pageant circuit. From its debut the show endured controversy for showing the extreme measures parents take in preparing their toddlers for pageants: long rehearsals, make-up sessions, dress fittings, talent coaching, bribing, scolding, and cajoling were all regular occurrences on the program. Publicity swelled when the program showed a five year old girl crying hysterically as her mother forced her to have her eyebrows waxed. She was terrified because last time the procedure was done some of her skin was ripped off in the process (Dawn). Although a great deal of chagrin was expressed over the child's public anguish, just as with all of the other reality shows featuring children, nothing was done. Thus what seems clear is that as the visibility of children as subjects of entertainment in the reality television universe continues to increase, the agency of the children on these programs continues to decrease. On *Kid Nation*, every few days the children had the opportunity to leave the program and return home. Today's reality TV kids have no such option.

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