

# Introduction

## A Regular American Life

Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. . . . Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

—BELL HOOKS, “EATING THE OTHER: DESIRE AND RESISTANCE”

This book is an examination of a niche market in contemporary US women’s popular fiction called “chica lit.” It is a growing niche—since the publication of *Dirty Girls*, publisher’s imprints such as St. Martin’s Griffin, HarperCollins’s series Avon Trade, Penguin’s Berkley Books, Grand Central Station, and others have put out an increasing number of chica lit fictions. As writing about Latina characters by Latina authors, it would seem that chica lit should be included within the parameters of US Latina/o literature. However, chica lit deliberately follows a good many of the “beach read” conventions of the hugely successful, commercially oriented chick lit and romance publishing markets. Because of this, chica lit’s representations of mostly middle-class Latina characters, in mass-market form, guarantees that these novels’ overt class strivings and conservative ideological underpinnings are quite different even from many popular Latina/o writers who now publish in large mainstream presses, such as Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, or Cristina García. Indeed, as Catherine Ramírez

asserts, *chica lit*, “like so many other narratives in and about the United States, fuse[s] wealth and Americanization” (24). As with the academic study of popular and mass-market women’s writing, which has had to defend itself from charges that its object of study is too consumer-oriented and not “literary,” the relatively small number of Latina/o studies analyses of *chica lit* demonstrates that its commercialism and seemingly “lite” content elicit much the same academic reaction in Latina/o studies. At the same time, prominent Latina/o studies scholars across disciplines, such as literary scholar Elena Sáez and anthropologist Arlene Dávila, have shown the ways that commodified representations of a gendered and raced *latinidad* constitute an integral share of what it means to “be Latina/o” in the US social imaginary; *chica lit* belongs in this signifying space. I place *chica lit* at the intersection of genre constraints, the marketing of ethnicity at the neoliberal turn of the century, the mainstreaming of Latina/o difference into what Erin Hurt calls a “common American sameness,” and the concomitant demonization of Latino poverty (134).<sup>1</sup>

Changes in US demographics in the last twenty years, particularly for US Latinos/as and Mexican Americans, have pushed the marketing strategies of mainstream popular women’s genre publishing to open up a small but important new arena of Latina/o writing. *Chica lit* might not exist, in fact, without the so-called “Latino explosion” of the mid to late 1990s and beyond, when census figures and marketing demographics were touted as evidence that Latinos had arrived on the (commercial) scene, giving rise to the aggressive marketing of “Latino” products, music, food, and dance. The hype was media-driven, and tended to privilege East Coast Latinos/as whose original national cultures derived more from the Hispanophone Caribbean than from Mexico or Central and South America. Speaking of the apex of this period, Agustín Gurza notes,

It began with Puerto Rican heartthrob Ricky Martin smiling and shimmying his way to the top of the pop charts with the sinuous “*Livin’ la Vida Loca*,” a sensual smash hit that came to symbolize the frenzied cultural breakthrough of a long-marginalized minority. . . . But Ricky wasn’t alone that year. There were J. Lo and Marc Anthony, two native Nuyoricans from Latino barrios. There was Miami’s Enrique Iglesias, privileged son of the suave Spanish pop

star. There was Carlos Santana and then Christina Aguilera. And in the wings, studying her English, was Shakira, the Lebanese Colombian who would soon seduce the world with her belly dance and her charming accent. Never before had so many Latinos spent so much time at the top of the pop charts in a single year. (Gurza)

In this 2004 essay Gurza takes a look back and opines that the Latino explosion disappeared like a flash in the pan. However, the attention paid by marketers and demographers to the growing Latino presence in the United States has in fact continued, though possibly not at such a fever pitch. Yet as Gurza argues, the homogenized “Latinization” of an extremely varied US Latino ethnicity—often imagined in the United States as a singular entity—guarantees that Latina products such as chica lit are dependent on a homogenized set of marketing assumptions about “Latino culture.” Although these assumptions are presented as marketing verities, they tend to reflect social imaginaries about what it means to be Latina/o.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, it can be argued that the space for the beginnings of “ethnic” chick lit began to be carved out first by Terry McMillan’s third and extremely successful novel *Waiting to Exhale*, published in 1992. This novel served as something of a precursor to white, chick lit “girlfriend” narratives such as Candace Bushnell’s *New York Observer* column and subsequent novel, television series, and two movies. But *Waiting to Exhale* not only introduced the question of race into the romance/financial success formula, it paved the way for publishers to be on the lookout for other ethnic book markets and authors. Publishers such as St. Martin’s Press and Penguin Books were poised to leap upon the first inkling that such a book was in the works—as became the case with Valdes’s *Dirty Girls*. These publishers had been primed by the widespread agreement, itself fueled by marketers’ and media’s reading of the 1990 and 2000 censuses, that these two decades would be the time of the “Latino explosion” when “Hispanics” would become the next great market in the United States.

At the time of this writing, chica lit is still very young; its beginning can be dated to the publication in 2003 of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez’s book *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, often hailed, in fact, in the publishing industry as the “Latina” *Waiting to Exhale*. This niche category of women’s fiction,<sup>3</sup> whose closest cousins are white and Af-

rican American chick lit and contemporary romance fiction, consists of books written by self-proclaimed assimilated US Latina and Mexican American authors, featuring young, twenty to thirty-year-old, upwardly mobile or already middle-class Latina or Mexican American strivers and arrivers. Popular media coined the term “chica lit,” although the publishing industry itself does not label such fiction this way; on publishing websites one can usually find chica lit listed under a general fiction heading, or sometimes, more rarely, in Latina romance. In fact, somewhere on the back cover, most publishers simply list their chica lit books as “fiction.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the name has stayed, and the ability of readers, interviewers, and reviewers to identify which books are chica lit is usually unchallenged, although scholars and reviewers will occasionally use the phrase “Latina chick lit.” Indeed, as close relation to romance fiction and chick lit, chica lit also has strong historical, publishing, and genre connections to other popular women’s writing, including coming-of-age, paranormal romance, and “career girl” fiction.

I began this introduction with a description of chica lit as it appears in the marketplace precisely because it is a mass-marketed, generic product (in the sense of belonging to one or more genres). Every scholar of chica lit has taken note of this fact to one extent or another, mostly in essays devoted to the work of Alisa Valdes. As Erin Hurt has noted of *Dirty Girls*, “This novel marks a turning point for Latina/o literature and criticism by raising questions about what Latina identity is and how we conceptualize it. *The Dirty Girls Social Club* ultimately upsets the traditional critical paradigm of reading Latina literary works in terms of their oppositional consciousness and asks how genre and the marketplace can shape a text’s cultural work” (134). I take Hurt’s suggestion that chica lit must be examined in terms of the requirements and exigencies of publishing and marketing popular women’s fiction together with the often knotty problem of how to safely represent, within the confines of mass marketing, a Latina ethnicity among the minefields of contradictory discourses about Latinos, immigration, and “Americanness.” Here, chica lit functions as a form of advice or behavior manual for the cultural Americanization of young Latinas, both strivers and arrivers. As an overarching approach, I place the production of chica lit, and the ways it markets a Latina middle-class subjectivity, within late twentieth- and early twenty-

first-century socioeconomic changes in the United States. As we will see, many Latina/Chicano critics of the US commodification of ethnicity define such changes under the rubric of neoliberalism.

## NEOLIBERALISM AND NARRATIVE

Scholars of cultural studies, literary studies, and anthropology such as Arlene Dávila, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Elena Sáez-Machado, and Kristy Ulibarri assert that alterations in the social representation of, and by, Latinos have come about as a result of shifts in social and cultural outlooks that have accompanied the adoption of economic neoliberalism, beginning in the latter part of the 1970s. Ulibarri's examination of neoliberalism in the shaping of Latina/Chicano literature from the 1970s forward argues that the popular notion of neoliberalism as a "new" socioeconomic order is something of a misnomer, since its elements do not constitute an entirely new socioeconomic vision. Neoliberalism's antecedents come both from a nineteenth-century classical liberalism that advocated less government in the economy and from a reaction to Keynesian "embedded liberalism" where the state "is given free rein within the market" (152). Such an outlook, as she notes, responds to its antecedents in privileging privatization and in its emphasis on a combination of individualized effort and self-correcting markets, rather than an acknowledgment of the structural aspects of socioeconomic barriers (153). Rather, neoliberalism is "a transformation (both ideologically and pragmatically) of the relationship between social relations and market objectives," ones that favor state deregulation as a way toward "developing more proficient (and less bureaucratic) government" (152). Arguments about the ways a neoliberal outlook frames contemporary discourses about the class, cultural, and citizenship status of Latinos centers on the (seemingly) unintended consequences of what came to be called the "Washington consensus." Although this so-called consensus was initially laid out in relationship to the debt crisis in Latin America in the 1980s, the neoliberal policies set out have slowly but surely been espoused as economic verities north of the border, with the result that many neoliberal policies have been put into practice not just in Latin America but also in the United States itself. Most importantly, these have included, over the long run, a fundamental shift in the United States not just

in governmental policies but in popular attitudes toward and representations of wealth and its accumulation, as well as the place of the (publishing) market in the social lives and imaginaries of consumers.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, as Ulibarri puts it, “Latino/a literature . . . is both contestatory and in contestation, where it resists the appropriations and homogeneity of the market but finds itself fulfilling the market’s desires for difference and niches.” Using a selection of post-1970s Latina/o literature as examples, she shows how this writing “represents and emblemizes Latinos/as in this socioeconomic climate” (155).

As part of her argument, Ulibarri cites sociocultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s work on the place of neoliberal practices in social life. Neoliberalist views, according to Ong, recast “politics as mainly a problematizing activity, one that shifts the focus away from social conflicts and toward the management of social life” (204–5). In this sense, Ulibarri maintains, “neoliberalism [is] the major framework in which social relations are shaped” (154). Such shaping has moved government policies aimed at redressing social problems away from Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” in the 1960s and ’70s, and toward, by the end of the 1980s, a view that poverty in particular is, if not remedied by market forces, then inevitable. Thus, some of the same policies of neoliberalism as had been forcibly reshaping Latin American economies during their debt crises—codified in what is loosely known as the “Washington consensus”—have been adapted through the turn of the century in socioeconomic practices in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Particularly important for my argument here, these scholars and others have discussed the role of poverty in neoliberal viewpoints. Arlene Dávila, for example, has documented how this framework has resulted in what she calls the “fall from grace” of poverty as a policy issue, and the rise of a policy and media emphasis on Latino upward mobility and celebratory representations of a Latino middle class (33–34).

In her *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (2008), Dávila pays close attention to a relatively new vision of middle-class Latinos as possessing American cultural citizenship. This discourse has at least in part been produced and reproduced by marketing interests, anxious to respond to the “growing xenophobia that envelops discussion of Latino immigrants which, extending to all Latinos, demands their continued sanitation through positive commercial images” (73). In unraveling some of the complications and

paradoxes that make up US representations of Latino/a class status, she notes that two authors of the 1980s and '90s in particular stimulated discussion about the image of Latinos as a monolithic "imagined working-class community" (31). These were Richard Rodriguez, whose *Hunger for Memory* came out in 1982, and Linda Chávez, with her *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation* of 1991. As Dávila points out, "Both espoused the view that empowerment can only come through assimilation, and both censure Latinos' culture and the Spanish language as culprits for their ghettoization" (32). Although immediately controversial, such writers opened "discussion on the Latino middle class throughout the 1990s," when it began to be the case that the very middle-class status of most "Latino researchers, journalists, and other Latinologists speaking for or on behalf of Latinos" produced a revisionary narrative of the middle-class Latino.

Finally, she notes, the marketing industry, picking up on such narratives, "has been a leading force in projecting Latinos' buying power and their middle-class status" (26), and points to the ways corporate interests have begun either commissioning or using academic and think-tank research on middle-class Latinos. These efforts are not completely without precedence, but what is new about them in the twenty-first century is the "growing importance of the corporate sector. . . . [and] the larger political and economic context favoring emphasis on upwardly mobile constituencies, at the cost of the working poor" (28). The over-celebratory nature of public and mass media discussions of the "rise" of a Latino middle class functions to put under erasure the fact that, as a group, Latinos "are still overwhelmingly working- and lower-middle class, [and] that [Latino/a] poor almost tripled during the same time there was a growth in the Latino middle class" (29). Such chica lit celebrations of Latina/o success, and their concomitant demonization of Latino poverty, are central to what Dávila has identified as a middle-class Latino "corrective" to the idea of Latinos/as as "monolithically working-class," an image "in which [Latino middle-class researchers] simply do not recognize themselves, and that many blame for their subordination" (*Latino Spin* 32). Such a corrective impulse, as I will argue, forms a central aspect of the motivations toward the didacticism of chica lit itself.

The marketing orientation and narrative content of chica lit, focusing on well-educated and upwardly mobile Latina characters, in-

dicates that the ideal chica lit audience that publishers and authors imagine is also, or at least aspires to be, middle-class. Given chica lit's strong emphasis on material success and cultural Americanization, the ideal audience would also seem to consist of young US-born Latinas who are negatively invested in what they view as out-of-date, clichéd, or stereotyped notions of "authentic" and therefore resistant, or cultural nationalist, ethnicity. As Ellen McCracken suggests, authors like Valdes "want to have it both ways—she both plays on stereotypes of Latina/o ethnicity and debunks them. . . . [her] chatty, colloquial language—designed to make readers feel part of a group of friends—takes a distance . . . from stereotypes of Latinas, precisely as it invokes these motifs to flavor the novel" ("From Chapbooks to Chica Lit" 17–18). Chica lit novels, then, balance awkwardly between rejecting racialized and classed stereotypes at the same time that such images help to do the difficult textual work of inserting, by way of foregrounding and contrast, their heroines' American values and (eventual) access to middle-class capital into genre elements that, unless otherwise marked, assume whiteness.

## CONVENTIONS AND GENRES

Chica lit expresses contemporary US fears and desires about the lives of Latinas through genre conventions, or elements, which are inextricably linked by now with mass-market production. These conventions—forming narrative patterns found in genre fiction ranging from contemporary romance to chick lit—are the parts of the textual machine from which the story must be built. Such constraints derive first from chica lit's relationship with the plot conventions, or formulae, of other popular women's genres, which include, in particular, close ties to the romance novel as well as to its more recent sister genre, chick lit. As Dirk de Geest and An Goris note of the language used in romance writers' handbooks, "Whereas traditional constraints are mainly intended to function as creative stimuli, the constraints pertaining to popular literature always (implicitly or explicitly) operate under the understanding that publication and commercial success are (part of) their ultimate goal. As a result, the economic, commercial, and institutional frameworks surrounding popular genres such as the romance novel constantly influence the formulation of their norms, despite



the fact that the illusion of writing as a free and autonomous creative activity is maintained throughout the handbooks” (82). The second set of limitations, linked equally to popular genre production as to mass-market requirements, is the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the term “Latina.” The genre-specific aspects of the books themselves, and the efforts of publishers’ marketing strategies, work to pare down received ideas about the “Latina” to a binary of stereotype or success. Yet the enormous complexities of Latino/Chicana lives and experiences in the United States, coupled with often paradoxical popular assumptions about Latinos and Chicanas, consistently undermine the very need, on the part of publishing houses, to pin down the proper marketing niche in which to place chica lit. In this sense, the apparently excessive nature of Latina/o subjectivity seems to escape chica lit’s genre and publishing constraints.

Thus, these novels pose an often vexed central question of how exactly their characters fit what might be considered “ethnic” qualities into a successful performance of a certain classed and gendered Americanness.<sup>7</sup> Such contradictions must be contained, and chica lit works to accomplish this in part by employing the convention of the dilemma and its resolution. That is, questions of race, poverty, and sexism are first shaped as private conflicts or dilemmas for the chica heroine, but depend on the notion that such conflicts are always ultimately resolvable. This generic structure is, of course, necessary in order to push the narrative over its potentially awkward humps and onward to its satisfactory resolution.

Thus, chica lit needs (happy) resolutions, not just to its characters’ plot-driven dilemmas, but to deal with the inevitable contradictions produced by fitting Latinas, in all their racial, cultural, and class differences and representations, into conventions originally developed mostly around the representations of white, middle-class women. Part and parcel of the convention of the resolvable conflict has to do with the apparent transparency of the writing—the didactic mode being so familiar to women as to seem like a natural means of communication—and the apparent “relatability” of its situations and characters to the reader. As Janice Radway notes of the romance readers with whom she worked, “Even though the Smithsonian women know the stories are improbable, they also assume that the world that serves as the backdrop for those stories is exactly congruent with their own” (109).

Through the chica lit plot, not merely fantastic but actual (if often improbable) possibilities adorn the relatability and congruency of the characters and situations to the reader's own life and world.

Like romance and chick lit novels, chica lit characters and their backgrounds often involve many references to the real world of young women's personal experiences with men, money, body image, and careers. The world of chica lit is also made to seem congruent with that of its readers via fixtures of real life, crowding the fictional scene with instantly recognizable references to real-world brands, corporate structures, and uses of technology such as blogs, e-mail, and Facebook. These stories' endings, as fantastic as they often are, must nevertheless offer some points of congruence with the woman reader's own world so that their promise is always possible and characters relatable, no matter how unlikely. For example, as we will see in further detail, Marta Acosta's third novel in her *Casa Dracula* quartet strategizes her Mexican American character Milagro's too-ethnic taste within the boundaries of media marketing that shapes the real (corporate) world of bridal and wedding preparations. The "reality factor" in this case is itself made up of appeals to a fantasy world created and sustained by reality television, print, and online media. Such a backdrop is especially easy for Acosta to use, since so many products aimed at women—from movies to magazines to television—present these very same "dreams" and fantasies as attainable realities (my own dirty little viewing secret, TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress*, has been seductive for me in just this fashion). Thus, the Latina reader can relate to the Latina character placed in such familiar situations, surroundings, and desires: "That *could* be me," no matter how unlikely.

Thus, at the same time that these narrative conclusions often dissolve into impossible fantasies of romance and success, chica lit—like romance and chick lit—must by its very nature also present situations and characters that seem "true to life" for its readers. Actual dilemmas of structural racism, sexism, and socioeconomic class position may be raised for the sake of relatability, but also must be presented as private and individual, overcome by the character's own spunky nature and the lessons she has learned in her journey toward romance and material well-being. In this sense, both the pleasure and the ease of reading chica lit, and its packaging as a throwaway "beach read" mean, if the testimony of my own students is anything to go on, that the didac-

tic and prescriptive functions of romance, chick lit, and chica lit will for the most part go unnoticed, though they are not inactive.<sup>8</sup>

### ADVICE AND AMERICANIZATION

The publishing and genre requirements within which chica lit is written and marketed demand a particular analytical framework that takes into account chica lit's place in the US history of popular, mass-market women's writing. Just as importantly, as I noted in my preface, any analysis of chica lit must attend to its central concern: how to "do" a recognizable ethnicity while clearly embodying the cultural requirements for being "American" in the early twenty-first century. In other words, this reading must also parse out chica lit's contributions to often contradictory representations and beliefs about the presumed Americanness of the Latina/o subject. In this sense, chica lit attempts to lay out, in narrative form, prescriptions for attaining an American cultural citizenship for upwardly mobile Latinas, one that gestures toward a kind of "value-added" model of legal citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Cultural citizenship assumes that legal citizenship is not enough to make one appear to be, or even to feel, fully part of the nation; as Renato Rosaldo explains, the cultural aspect of citizenship uses "cultural expression to claim public rights and recognition" (35), especially when such recognition and its attendant rights are in question. In this sense, my earlier assertion (see preface) of Marcela's Americanization is only seemingly at odds with the book's title, *Becoming Latina*. At the end of this narrative, Marcela is clearly and finally delineated as "American": legally a US citizen, of course, and patriotic, yes. But she has also figured out how to craft a "Mexican" heritage into material, romantic, and even social success. She does so by working on her own animated movie about Cortéz, marrying a middle-class Mexican American, George (not Jorge), who works in accounting, and engaging in the "uplift" of a barrio Mexican American, Lupe Perez, who will in Lara Rios's next book go to college and write a thesis called "Being Americana." Interestingly, the most obvious solution—that Marcela could actually go to Mexico and explore her "heritage" there—seemingly constitutes a danger in chica lit generally, not merely to the Americanization of these young women but to their becoming Latina in a correct manner. In only two of the twelve books I examine here will

the idea to visit a Latin American or Caribbean country of origin even occur to any of the characters. For the chica heroine to become, and remain, culturally American, these narratives must take place *within the boundaries* of the United States. Yet if, as happens occasionally, the chica heroine is located, for whatever amount of time, into the greater Hispanophone Americas, she must then be relocated quickly back to the States and the journey constituted as a necessary step on the path to the happy ending.

These books' insistence on cultural enfranchisement as an American exceeds the fact that their characters are legally American by birth; in other words, there is something about the Latina or Mexican American subject that continues to be seen as "foreign," that is, not American. This was already evident in Americanization discourses of the 1920s, directed especially at women who were already Mexican Americans, particularly in border states such as California and Texas. As George Sánchez has shown, women were the target of these campaigns, and when older Mexican immigrant women "proved difficult to Americanize, these programs focused their efforts on the adolescent American-born Chicana" (Sánchez 476). Sánchez begins, indeed, by quoting an Americanization teacher of Mexican and second-generation Mexican American women, who wrote in 1923 that "the Americanization of the women is as important a part as that of the men. They are harder to reach but more easily educated. . . . The children of these foreigners are the advantages to America, not the naturalized foreigners. These are never 100% Americans, but the second generation may be. 'Go after the women' and you may save the second generation for America" (476). Both its "corrective" impulses against "stereotypes" of Latino poverty and un-American activities, and *chica lit's* connection to other prescriptive and didactic genres such as chick lit and romance novels, illuminate these novels as behavior manuals, teaching and informing their readers proper American values. Just as Americanization campaigns needed instruction or advice manuals to "go after the women," *chica lit* does the same. As Caroline Smith shows, chick lit in general—and here I include *chica lit*—is engaged with what she calls the "consumer culture medium" of advice for women, referring outside their own pages to real or thinly disguised magazines, columns, television shows, and romantic comedies aimed at women. As she notes, "these mediums heavily influence the

protagonists . . . dictating to them expected feminine ideals and behaviors that they should attempt to achieve” (5). References to real-life women’s advice media—such as *Dirty Girls*’s Rebecca’s ownership of the women’s magazine *Ella*, an allusion to the magazine *Latina*—chica lit itself acts as late modern women’s advice literature. In this sense, chica lit presents solutions not merely to women’s problems about friends, careers, and romance but also specifically to legally and generationally American, assimilated Latinas whose ethnicity nevertheless raises suspicions about their American identities. As we will see, chica lit’s didactic undertones and class-oriented corrective narratives show its readers, through the trials and ultimate triumphs of chica characters carefully drawn so as to appear “relatable” to real-world lives, how to incorporate a largely imagined Latina or Mexican American cultural heritage into what Lara Rios calls “being Americana.”

Chica lit thus functions as a teaching device about the proper use of ethnicity in middle-class women’s lives, producing a normalized and, as far as possible, *unmarked* ethnic identity constructed by participation in both the presumably private world of romance and, importantly, the public world of business and careers. Chica lit advice on such matters, indeed, looks much like that which is packaged and merchandised, for example, in the pages of *Latina* magazine.<sup>10</sup> How chica lit presents its lessons on achieving the Americanness of a “regular” life, and what sorts of behaviors, knowledges, sacrifices and, of course, rewards this life entails for both chica lit authors and their characters, are questions I address in this book.

Although we usually think of nineteenth-century romance, often addressed to its “dear reader,” as the epitome of the authorial, didactic narrative, such “teacherly” modes are still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the United States, central to a vast array of products marketed both for and by women. Women might indeed be said to be habituated to the advice form, easily found as it is even in the checkout lane at the grocery, where the pages of women’s magazines offer their readers a wealth of information—and advice on how to properly use such knowledge—on a seemingly infinite array of problems and pleasures. Women’s popular novels, too, provide information and instruction. As Janice Radway writes in her now classic *Reading the Romance* (1984), “instruction is one of the principle functions books can perform for their readers” (109). Indeed, Radway

found that her readers had “faith in the reliability of mimesis” to the extent that, as she put it, “the value of the romance novel is a function of the information it is thought to contain . . . this information [is] a highly valued commodity in the advanced industrial society of which [the readers] are a part” (107). Some of the best work on this subject comes from scholarship on the historical connections between women’s advice manuals and women’s writing.

The linked genres of domestic, romance, and chick lit have long provided their readers with a sentimental education in “received ideas,” romantic notions, and lessons for behavior. It has also served, according to Nancy Armstrong, in the (re)production of nation and class, particularly in the shaping of the notion of “separate spheres.” Throughout the Americas writers often employed the sentimental and/or domestic novel in imagining—and didactically shaping—an emerging national, racial, and gendered modernity. As Doris Sommer demonstrates so aptly in her now classic *Foundational Fictions*, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin American sentimental novel (written, interestingly, mostly by men) couched racial and sexual union as metaphors for the formation of the new Latin American nation. Both Latin American and British sentimental fiction were important to the shaping of the modern nation when questions of class and gender demanded the delineation of new class systems as well as, for women of means, the construction and maintenance of a “domestic sphere” shaped as separate from the “public sphere.” As Armstrong argues, such “spheres” are born in the realm of ideological discourses as they are constructed as material realities: “modern institutional cultures depend upon the separation of ‘the political’ from ‘the personal’ and . . . they *produce* and maintain this separation on the basis of gender. . . . [E]ven as certain forms of cultural information were separated into these two opposing fields, *they were brought together* as an intricate set of pressures that operated on the subject’s body and mind to induce self-regulation” (“Some Call it Fiction” 578, my emphasis). The ways these presumably separate “spheres” have been constructed as such in the twenty-first century United States are to some extent quite different from the earlier fiction both Sommer and Armstrong discuss. Nevertheless, with its simultaneous emphasis on the public nature of a woman’s individual style and her professional attainments, coupled with the idea that young women must once again be taught

how to create the domestic nature of home and romance, chica lit also brings two seemingly “opposing fields” together. This process itself, narrativized, functions as a teacherly guide for the proper knowledge, methods, and behaviors in fully becoming Americanized.

Popular press reviews have praised chica lit like *Dirty Girls Social Club* for its apparently non-didactic tone, an observation that only makes sense if we understand two things. First, ethnic fiction is assumed to be both didactic and, usually, a “downer” in its representations of poor, working-class, and oppressed Latino and Chicana characters. Second, chica lit’s opposite tactic of marketing itself as mere entertainment, and representing its characters as being “normal” in their problems and desires, reframes readers’ expectations that its ethnic focus will be preachy, hectoring, or depressing. Yet a close look reveals those recurring elements of chica lit that are clearly meant to be informative: for example, Valdes’s characters, such as Lauren, repeat the refrain “Did you know that. . . .?” followed by factoids about Latinos and Latin Americans. In addition, chica lit clearly demonstrates, by negative examples of the “culture of poverty” and invidious comparisons with “old school” Chicano nationalism, what *not* to do and how *not* to perform cultural Americanization. These didactic and advice-giving elements come by way of overtly didactic sentimental novels and their skeletal but still discernable outlines in romance and chick lit fictions, updated for the perceived needs of middle-class US Latinas at the turn of the century (Ramírez 26).<sup>11</sup> The adoption of the advice manual in the form of a didactic narrative has its own history; here, it serves two ends for chica lit. First, the ubiquitous nature even today of advice for women constitutes a familiar and, because familiar, comforting and even pleasurable framework of information and instruction. Secondly, the ways in which advice and teaching for women is delivered provides a framework for the desire to provide a “corrective” to those “stereotypical” beliefs about Latinos’ and Mexican Americans’ poverty, resistance to middle-class values, and lack of ambition. Indeed, Ramírez’s essay on *Dirty Girls* gives evidence through her discussion of readers’ online comments that readers of chica lit feel that they have been both educated and recognized. Non-Latina readers report learning what it’s like to “be a Latina,” while self-identified Latina readers have reported that chica lit is both mimetic and relatable, in that they “see themselves” in its pages (15–16).

The production of advice manuals for women in the first part of the 1800s was not centered only in the United States and Britain, but appeared wherever there were (usually privileged) women who could read, for example in Mexico.<sup>12</sup> Especially in the United States, however, these advice manuals bear a close relationship to popular women's novels, one that continues all the way through the twenty-first century, with changing emphases depending on audience and time period.<sup>13</sup> In her study of chick lit, Caroline Smith notes that references to both fictive and actual women's advice manuals published since the 1980s (such as *The Rules*) appear often within the pages of chick lit fictions. She goes on to extend her definition of what constitutes advice manuals to chick lit mentions of women's "lifestyle" and decorating magazines, catalogues such as those put out by Williams-Sonoma, Martha Stewart shows and magazines, and even references to romantic comedies (5). Chica lit, with its emphasis on the (re)creation of a properly modern American Latina, would seem to have few specifically "Latina advice manuals" to fall back on. Yet drives for the Americanization especially of Mexican girls and women in the first part of the twentieth century—particularly in the 1920s and '30s—did produce domestic advice manuals that were at the same time explicitly about helping them to adjust to becoming, and being, American.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, women were early on considered the best bet for getting ethnic—particularly Mexican—families Americanized. With anxieties and debates over migration from south of the US borders reaching much the same key pitch as they did in the first part of the twentieth century, around the immigration of Northern and Eastern Europeans, normalizing and Americanizing efforts have appeared once again, this time in the work of Latina/o writers, editors, and magazines.

In this context, the prescriptive aspects of chica lit have their roots, so to speak, in such seemingly non-chica lit places as governmental policy papers that examine the relatively small number of Latinos who have achieved middle-class success. These studies, as Dávila has shown, have trickled down from their origins into marketing strategies and into media headlines as well as into representations of Latinas in the entertainment industry (*Latino Spin* 32). More importantly for chica lit readers, these descriptions, and their implicit prescriptive nature, for the attainment of such a life are laid out as well in the articles and advertisements of lifestyle-oriented print and online magazines, from



Guanabee.com and UrbanLatino.com<sup>15</sup> to the much more serious fare in HispanicBusiness.com. The media conglomerate Batanga touts its website iMujer.com, for example, as the “premier lifestyle destination for Latinas looking to empower themselves with day-to-day solutions and information that allows them to be the woman they aspire to be” (“Hispanic Fact Pack”). Finally, the *Latina* print magazine, whose publishers also produce the middle-class African American magazine *Essence*, has been instrumental within the pages of chica lit—*Dirty Girls*’ New Mexican character Rebecca, for example, owns and publishes *Ella*, a thin disguise for *Latina*. Additionally, *Latina* itself has provided an important forum for chica lit, including sections from soon-to-be published books and interviews with authors. Like women’s magazines, the informative aspects of the chica lit narrative can run the gamut of topics from bulimia, alcoholism, autism, rape, fashion, and style, to the dangers of men and poverty, to taste and class.

The didactic project of chica lit involves raising and then managing the anxieties of inhabiting a gendered, ethnic, and racialized identity, which is itself the focus of a vexed and often contradictory set of discourses of fear and desire in the United States. To this end, chica lit must work to shape, both through narrative and through genre formula, the social imaginary of a nonthreatening, middle-class “American Latina.” Because chica lit itself participates in the same project of addressing—interpellating, in the French philosopher Louis Althusser’s sense of calling forth—what Armstrong calls “bourgeois femininity,” as she shows such middle-class femininity is “constructed through the domestic fictions that represent it as already in place” (“Some Call it Fiction” 579). Radway echoes this conclusion, noting that “the romance is not merely the analogical representation of a preexisting sensibility but a positive agent in its creation and perpetuation” (149–51). In much the same way, chica lit assures its readers through the very representation of such a subject that such a properly modern and American chica already exists. Using formulaic strategies concerned with work and romance borrowed from other genres, chica lit also reassures its reader that she too can and will embody this ethnic, American, and properly feminine subjectivity, so infinitely to be desired.

Yet there are, of course, some fundamental differences between chica lit and earlier didactic novels for women. Like contemporary romance and chick lit, each chica lit fiction makes sure that there is no

doubt in the main character's mind that she will be, even if it is in the unexpressed "future" of the novel, happily settled in a well-monetized heterosexual coupledness at the same time that she is convinced of her right to sexual and financial independence. These freedoms, installed through the efforts of Women's Liberation and feminist movements in general, have been recast at the turn of the century in popular media so as to be deeply anxiety provoking: how to be successfully single, professional, and "fun," while still remaining active in the marriage market. How to "have it all" as mother, wife, and professional. Even more problematic, especially for chica lit written after the Great Recession, how, as a Mexican American, Cuban American, or Puerto Rican chica, does one attain the high level of financial success these novels seem almost inevitably to require?

Popular women's writing in general, as we saw in Armstrong's work, "induces self-regulation." However, lessons in self-regulation are no good unless they reach their intended audience. Thus, chica lit's narrative strategies and formulae are intrinsically part of a (increasingly online and digital) publishing and entertainment "machine" that ensures the rapid production of easily consumable niche-market texts. The formulaic plot and narrative lines between novels like chica lit and other women's popular genres, produced in the marketplace of "fast fiction"—that is, fiction meant to be produced and consumed at a quick rate—have become increasingly blurred. The pace of production and, especially, consumption of women's fiction in particular has contributed to this blurring of genres. Presses that publish genre fiction have also worked on the venue side of publishing in creating new and ever more convenient means and locations for selling their books quickly and cheaply.<sup>16</sup> Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the ease and most especially the privacy (for loving romance novels or their cousins, chick or chica lit fiction, can still be for women a matter of some shame) of purchasing books on e-publishing platforms has also opened up a world of fast accessibility.

## FAST FICTION

Scholars of women's popular fiction in the United States have long argued both for the serious study of women's popular literature and for historicizing the financial success and influence women authors